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# THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

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# THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

BY

PHILIP BOSWOOD BALLARD

M.A., D.LIT.

*Author of "Mental Tests," "The New Examiner,"  
"The Changing School," "Teaching the Mother  
Tongue," "Fundamental English," etc.*

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**TO MY WIFE  
FREDA  
AND MY DAUGHTER  
BRONWEN**

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## PREFACE

As a mere act of courtesy the reader of a book should be told in the preface what to expect. Hence follows a brief indication of the main topics treated in this book and of the spirit in which they are approached.

The reader is first asked to psychologise a little to think about his own thoughts and about the way in which those thoughts are expressed in words. He is also asked to consider what is meant by meaning—the meaning of words, the meaning of phrases, the meaning of sentences. What, indeed, is a word? and what is a sentence? I do not contend that any of these things are easy; but I do contend that they are all profitable. They lie at the foundations of an art which we practise every day, and every hour of the day—the art of verbal expression—an art in which, in spite of abundant practice, we are all amateurs; some of us amateurs in the double sense of being lovers of the art on the one hand, and bunglers at it on the other.

After a plunge into psychology the book divagates into grammar and linguistics, and even into that most perilous of realms, literary criticism. But in all his wanderings the author, as an old schoolmaster, has ever kept a keen eye for points which have a bearing on the education of the young. And those who note the trail of the pedagogue over the pages, and, noting, frown thereon, will, I trust, also discover that he is at least a pedagogue of the newer and kindlier school—one to

whom education is not an enforcement of rules and awarding of marks, but a lifelong experiment and adventure. Indeed, he has one or two bones to pick with the schoolmaster of the sterner sort. He quarrels with him for making mythical rules and for keeping alive certain linguistic prejudices which but for him would long ago have died a natural death. The prejudice against the honest verb *to get* is a case in point. It is a good verb and true, and it does yeoman's service in every branch of human intercourse. Yet it is given a bad name at school and remains under a cloud ever after. There is in this book a stout defence of this hapless verb.

The main position taken up is that thought is basic and primary. Of the two factors, thought and language, that go to produce living speech, thought takes the leading part while language follows and obeys. For language rightly considered is but a tool—a tool which man in the course of ages has invented and fashioned for his own use and benefit. This, however, is no reason why its value or its potency should be underrated. Indeed, no other tool of man's invention has had anything like so profound an influence on his mind and destiny. It is, in fact, a tool that has educated its maker.

Not that the tool once fashioned is fixed and unalterable. For a language is in many ways like a living organism. It grows, it changes, and it decays. And yet it has no independent life of its own. It has no vitality nor power beyond that which it receives from the men and women who speak it. But if it is no longer spoken—if it is a dead language preserved only in

books—then indeed it is unchanged and unchangeable. Then too can it have a grammar which, on the evidence of observed facts, codifies rules that the dead writers of the language actually observed (or broke). But a living language is a different thing. Even though its destiny is largely shaped and steadied by its literature, it is ever changing in its elements and in its structure. And these changes, slow and slight though they be, do by a steady and cumulative process carry the language in the course of ages far away from its starting-point.

This fact of change has given rise to two different types of grammarians. One of them calls the change development; the other calls it drift. One stands aside and looks on; he observes the facts, classifies them, generalises on them, puts the result in a book, and calls it grammar. The other tries to take a hand in controlling the changes. If he had his way he would stop them altogether. For grammar is not to him a thing in the making but a thing already made. He accordingly treats the living language as though it were a dead language, and would have the linguistic habits of the past fix for ever the linguistic habits of the future. The trouble is that the changes go on in spite of all his protests.

Then there is a third type of grammarian. He would remould the language by artificial means. Some would do it piecemeal, others on a gigantic scale. At a women's conference some years ago a member got up and pointed out that the tyranny of man appeared no less in the laws of grammar than in the laws of the land. While the masculine personal pronoun had three distinct forms, *he*, *his*, and *him*, for the separate

cases of the singular, the feminine pronoun had only two, *she* and *her*. She suggested as a remedy for this gross piece of injustice that the feminine pronoun should be declined *she*, *shis*, and *shim*. If I could recall the lady's name, and discover shis address I should write to shim to congratulate shim on shis ingenious and attractive proposal. Unfortunately the public has been blind to its merits. This is an instance of piecemeal reform. Those who wish to see reforms carried out on a large scale, and devised for a special purpose, should have a look at Basic English. A brief account of it is given in this book.

An attempt is made to discover new trends in English literature, and to examine, with what impartiality I can compass, the credentials of a certain school of English writers who claim to be the true exponents of the present age, and the true pioneers of literary progress. Their appeal, they say, is to the present and the future; but much of their inspiration, so far as I can see, comes from the past. For to the casual reader they look uncommonly like the French decadents of the eighties and nineties of last century. And it is not quite certain whether they are out to intrigue the curious and shock Mrs. Grundy, or whether they are whole-heartedly serious and sincere. Solemn they certainly are—especially in their jokes. That is if they are jokes—which again is not quite certain. However, these writers appear to have the support of a few scholarly critics quartered at Cambridge, and the last two chapters of this book are devoted to an examination of their views.

It is of course impossible to believe that the mind of

man has in any of the languages of the past or of the present found a perfect means of expression, or of communication between man and man. To navigate "the unplumb'd, salt, estranging sea" that separates one island soul from another is at best a difficult and precarious task, but the restless human spirit will never cease to build new boats, and make new charts, and try new routes, until the waters themselves no longer separate—or until the islands themselves have sunk back into the universal sea

One duty still remains—a very pleasant one. I have to thank four of my friends, who have taken a special interest in this book, have read the proofs, and have given me the benefit of their comments and their criticisms. The discerning reader who can separate my prejudices from my sound opinions is asked to associate my friends' views with the latter only.

My debt to Professor Spearman is obvious to all. No one can read far in this book without seeing how much I owe to Spearman's original mind and inspiring influence. In the appendix on Noegenesis I make an attempt at explaining one of his contributions to Psychology which has a special bearing on the subject under discussion. Then there is Sir Philip Hartog, who, nearly thirty years ago, by his little book *The Writing of English*, struck a note of *Wake up, England!* which has not yet ceased echoing in our ears. To discussions with him, and to his shrewd criticisms and happy suggestions, this book owes a deep debt. Finally, there are my old friend Mr. E. J. Kenny, and my old friend and pupil Dr. Emrys Jones, both of whom have always been ready to place at my disposal their English

scholarship and their literary taste. I am appreciative of my friends' help. I am more appreciative still of their friendship and intellectual companionship. To them my gratitude; to the reader my greetings.

P. B. B.

CHESWICK,

*August 1934.*

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## CHAPTER I

### THE THREE ESSENTIALS

I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven.—SAMUEL JOHNSON.

Language, sir, the blood of the soul, sir, into which our thoughts run, and out of which they grow.—O. W. HOLMES. ♣

WHEN we examine sticks and stones we examine sticks and stones only. Our concern is with objects in the material world—with one single order of things. But when we examine words, as spoken or written, we are considering their meanings as well ; and their meanings split up into two distinct references : one to the mind of the meaner and the other to the things meant. In fact we cannot think clearly about language, nor can we discuss it with any degree of profit, unless we bear in mind that we are always dealing, not with one category, words, but with three categories—thoughts, words, and things. With any one of these three left out language, in its strictest sense, could not exist.

This fundamental fact will be made clearer by the following specific instance. Let us suppose that I am describing to a friend a visit to a family with whom he is thoroughly familiar. “ *Isabel*,” I remark, “ *was reading a book*,” and he at once understands what I say. In this simple act of communicating an idea by means of language three distinct orders of existences are involved. The first comprises the mind of the speaker, the mind of the hearer, and the thought that is transmitted from

one to the other. It is the mental realm. The second order is composed of the words used by the speaker and heard by the hearer : *Isabel was reading a book*. This is the verbal realm. The third and last order consists of the things meant, or referred to, by the speaker : the real Isabel, the real book, and the real act of reading. If I call it the realm of things I restrict the use of the word *things* to things as thought of, referred to, or talked about ; in short, *things* is made to signify *things meant*. With this reservation we may provisionally assert that every act of speech, whether spoken or written, involves three distinct kinds of entities—thoughts, words, and things. I say “provisionally” because later on we shall discuss the question whether words are necessary, or whether other symbols may take their place.

The necessity for two minds in the realm of thought is stoutly maintained by Samuel Butler in his essay on Thought and Language, where he makes this assertion : “It takes two people to say a thing—a sayee as well as a sayer. The one is as essential to any true saying as the other.” The person who talks to himself without intending to be heard he dismisses with the remark that it is abnormal, that it is not well done, and that it does harm to the man who practises it. In fact the only kind of talking to oneself that Samuel Butler takes into account in his essay is talking to oneself aloud. The other kind, the silent internal speech that goes on in our minds during most of our waking moments, he completely ignores. The dramatist does not ignore it. He gives it audible utterance and calls it soliloquy. So unnatural is this device, however, that it is used but

sparingly even by its greatest addict ; by the modern playwright it is discarded altogether. It is manifestly absurd for a person to stand on the stage and speak loudly enough for an audience of a thousand people to hear him, while those who stand at his very elbow are not supposed to know that he is speaking at all. And even those who are legitimately listening are not the real audience. The real audience is the speaker himself. So the absurdity of the position need not be contested. But it is not the soliloquy that is absurd; it is the audible utterance. The soliloquy itself—the silent monologue that runs on and on from morning to night and even invades one's dreams—is in no way absurd ; to a rational being it is the most simple and natural thing in the world.

How then can we bring the soliloquy into our scheme when the term itself confines the process to one person ? In the soliloquy the sayer has no sayee to listen to him. And yet I think it may plausibly be contended that the sayee is not really absent ; he is present in the guise of an imaginary listener. For many of our reveries when closely scrutinised will be seen to consist in the main of imaginary conversations. And perhaps the most profitable of them are of the anticipatory sort. We think out what we shall say to So-and-so to persuade him to carry out our wishes, or to dissuade him from thwarting them. In the secrecy of his own mind the orator meditates his speech and the preacher prepares his sermon. Before putting pen to paper, and often in the absence of pen and paper, the writer composes his essay, and the novelist spins the staple of his story. Rehearsals, all of them. The real performance comes

later on. Yet the rehearsal itself has all the essential elements of true speech. A is expressing his thoughts for the benefit of B, even though B should be nothing but A, mirrored in his own mind.

It is readily admitted, however, that all reveries are not rehearsals. Some of them are attempts, casual or strenuous, fitful or continuous, to review an incident, to develop a theme, or to solve some sort of problem. Others are mere day-dreams in which the dreamer plays an heroic rôle in a brave world which seems to unfold of its own accord before his vision. And though in none of these brown studies is dialogue conspicuous, monologue is abundant enough. The train of thought may, or may not, be accompanied by a train of images ; it is always accompanied by a train of words. So long, in fact, as a man is alive and awake (and sometimes indeed when he is asleep) there goes on in the silence and secrecy of his own mind a running commentary—a commentary in words, words, words—on the events that occur both in the world of external reality and in the world of his own imagination. He is for ever talking to himself ; sometimes well, sometimes badly, but for ever talking. And if there is no other listener, real or imaginary, he assumes the rôle himself. He is his own sayee.

In defending the view that soliloquy, or inner speech, is as true a form of language as any other—is indeed language in the very act of mintage—and that the apparent absence of an audience does not invalidate the distinction between the sayer and the sayee, I am not expressing an idle opinion, but putting forward a view which has a vitally important bearing on the theory

and practice of education. For if thought and inner speech are so closely interwoven that they grow and decay together, we cannot cultivate one without cultivating the other. And training in the use of the mother tongue—the tongue in which a child thinks and dreams—becomes the first essential of schooling and the finest instrument of human culture. Since the sayee so reacts upon the sayer as in large measure to mould and modify both his thoughts and his words ; since, in fact, the use of the mother tongue is not only an action but a transaction, where one of the partners—the one which I have called the sayee—is ignored, the training inevitably fails of its full purpose.

And that he is ignored is quite obvious to anybody who will take the trouble to examine the composition exercises set at our schools and colleges. The pupil is put to write a piece of composition on a given topic but is never told for whose benefit it is supposed to be written. It is addressed to nobody in particular ; an utterance issued into the void. And yet it is clear that just as a speaker requires a hearer, so does a writer require a reader. And the reader cannot be left out of the reckoning ; for it is he that supplies much of the stimulus and a great deal of the direction. When a person writes he always writes for somebody, and he knows who that somebody is. When he writes a private diary he knows that the somebody is himself. The audience, if I may be allowed to use this word so as to include those who read as well as those who hear, may consist of one person or of many. When the writer writes a private letter his audience consists of one person ; when he writes a book it consists of a

group of persons—and a fairly definite group of persons. It is true that the book, on being published, is presented to the world at large ; but the author at the time of writing is always conscious at the back of his mind of the limited circle of readers to whom he makes his appeal. The audience which F. H. Bradley had in mind when he wrote *Appearance and Reality* was very different from the audience which Edgar Wallace had in mind when he wrote *The Ringer*.

Obvious as this fact is, its significance was not brought to light until Sir Philip Hartog in 1907 published his book, *The Writing of English*. He there showed the necessity for defining the audience, and laid stress on a distinction which, in a later publication, he called the distinction between *record* and *message* ; a record being a writing addressed to oneself, and a message a writing addressed to somebody else. And he clearly showed how the specifying of the sayee lent point and purpose to the pupil's efforts as a sayer. True, the school does not offer much scope or variety for the audience. For whoever the audience is supposed to be, the pupil knows very well that his real audience is his teacher. If, as a school exercise, he writes a letter to his grandmother, he is all along conscious of the fact that it is not his grandmother who will read it but his teacher—a far less indulgent critic. 'The teacher is the stock audience, the dummy audience, the artificial audience. It is an audience which does not expect to be amused and has no wish to be informed. What wonder then that the pupil does not find it inspiring ! What wonder that he regards his essay neither as a message nor as a record, but simply as a performance to be praised, found fault

with, or assigned a certain number of marks ; or as another alternative—an alternative which does not always appal him—to be consigned to the waste-paper basket.

In the artificial atmosphere of the school this can never be wholly remedied ; but it can be partly remedied. It is always possible to specify the audience. And it is sometimes possible to get a real audience other than the teacher. The pupil's essay may be read to the class or be published in the school magazine. Even when the teacher has to deputise for the audience—has in his marking to act the part of the younger brother, or the country cousin, or the friend in a foreign land by whom the script is supposed to be read—he should at least be a good deputy ; he should act his part with credit and conviction ; he should fit his comments to the character of the hypothetical sayee. In other words, he should be as sympathetic and genial as the case permits. For the writing of good English is a plant of tardy growth ; so tardy that the teacher's early task is not so much to make it grow well as to make it grow at all. And it grows far better under the sunshine of praise than under the chill of indifference, or the frost of a niggling criticism.

So much for the first realm—the realm of thoughts. Coming now to the realm of words, we reach the very core of our discussion. And around us hard questions spring up in crowds. How did language begin ? Was it an accident, or was it design ? Have animals a language ? Is thought possible without language ? Is language possible without words ? What is the relation of a word to its meaning ? What is the meaning of

meaning? What makes one language better than another? Did the old synthetic languages develop into modern analytic languages, or did they merely dwindle and decay? Is a universal language possible; and, if possible, is it desirable? To these questions there is no end; and to some there is no answer. Let us, however, tackle one or two of them.

The origin of language we will lightly touch upon. It is an old problem, worn threadbare by innumerable controversies, and, like the quadrature of the circle, peculiarly attractive to cranks. That is why, no doubt, the illustrious Philological Society once passed a resolution never to admit a paper, or to allow a discussion, on the origin of language.<sup>1</sup> I assume that the reader is already acquainted with the three theories which were nicknamed by Max Muller the *pooh-pooh* theory, the *bow-wow* theory, and the *ding-dong* theory. The trouble with these theories is that they explain so little. Each of them plausibly accounts for its own small class of words, but leaves the main bulk and body of every known language wholly unexplained. Even when the three are taken collectively they do little better. They are three small candles trying to light up a cathedral; and although to these three a fourth has recently been added by Sir Richard Paget, its beams are just as feeble as the others, and the darkness of the building is as deep as ever.

What the theorists are all after is to find some sort of natural or rational connection between a word and its meaning; and by its meaning (a word of exasperating

<sup>1</sup> Referred to by Sir Richard Paget in the preface to his *Human Speech*.

ambiguity) I here simply mean the thing meant. For a word is a symbol; and a symbol always has a partner, its partner being the thing symbolised. The word's partner is the thing meant. How did these two come to be associated? I am now writing with a pen on paper. How did the sounds that make up this sentence come to mean what they mean to us now? How did the word *paper* come to signify the stuff we know by that name? There is no imitative suggestion in the sound of the word, such as the bow-wow theory would require; nor is the word a natural exclamation which the sight of the object evokes, as the pooh-pooh theory would have us believe; nor is there some peculiar subtle, but still explicable, fitness in the use of the word, which is assumed by the ding-dong theory. The man who heard the word *paper* for the first time would have no clue whatever as to its meaning. By no human ingenuity could he infer the thing from the name, nor the name from the thing. ✓The relation between them is arbitrary and senseless. And so far as we can see it always has been. It is true we can push our inquiries back through the French and the Latin to the Greek word *papuros*, which meant a reed or sedge from which the Egyptians made their writing material. But this does not help us in the least. We have still to explain the connection between the aquatic plant in question and the word *papuros*. The words *pen* and *write* and *now* baffle us in the same way. When we come to consider such words as *either* and *but* and *else* our perplexity still further deepens. For we fail to conceive how these words ever came to be paired with the subtle relationships which they now indicate.

In fine we must accept the words we use, not as natural signs, but as conventional signs. And as conventional signs they serve their purpose just as well as if they were natural.

Yet it seems reasonable to believe that in the remote beginnings of human speech the symbol bore to the thing symbolised some intelligible form of relationship. We cherish the belief that the original mating was not wholly by chance, but by some sort of analogy, or affinity, or happy correspondence; and we are fully persuaded that the earliest language of the human race was a language of natural signs. And since it is much easier to find a natural correspondence between gesture and meaning than between sound and meaning, the theory that now holds the field is that the original language of mankind was gesture language. Indeed, in certain primitive races to-day we seem to witness the gradual supersession of the language of gesture by the language of spoken words. And in the most civilised of races a few vestigial gestures still linger on. Yet even here we find the natural bond between sign and meaning so obscured by incidents of chance and change that its secret has been lost for ever. Though many of our surviving gestures seem easy to explain, many others are cryptic in the extreme. It is easy, for instance, to see why the crooking and uncrooking of the forefinger means, "Come here"; and why the tapping of the forehead with the hand means, "So-and-so has bats in the belfry"; but it is not easy to see why a horizontal shake of the head should mean "No," while a vertical shake means "Yes." Still less easy is it to see why the mere dropping of an eyelid should mean

so much and be so difficult to put briefly into words. For I take it that the winker by his wink says at least this to the winkee: "You and I understand each other quite well on this point, and we see an aspect of the matter which is hidden from the simpletons standing round." The wink is a gestural form of dramatic irony; but it would need great ingenuity to explain how the irony got there.

It is on the gesture hypothesis that Sir Richard Paget grafts the theory to which I have referred above and which may perhaps be regarded as an offshoot of the ding-dong theory.<sup>1</sup> Here it is in brief. Man first spoke in pantomime, and made abundant use of his hands. But when his hands were full, or were engaged in handicraft, he was unable to communicate his thoughts. He had to find some other way. Fortunately he had been preparing that other way all along. For his hand movements had by some secret sympathy been accompanied by imitative movements of his tongue, his lips, and his jaws, just as a boy learning to write will follow with his tongue the movements of his fingers, or a man will grind his teeth when pressing the juice of a lemon into a glass. The mouth mimicked the hand. Then a great discovery was made. It was discovered that when the oral movements were accompanied by sound from the throat, the mouth pantomime was recognised by the ear, and for the first time human beings were able to communicate their thoughts in the dark, or round a corner. So the tongue became an understudy to the hand, and took the stage when the hand was otherwise employed. And so well did

<sup>1</sup> See *Human Speech*, p. 132 ff.

the understudy do his work that he soon ousted his chief; and went a step further. For though the oral pantomime was in the main an imitation of the manual pantomime, it was not entirely so. The lips, tongue, and jaws were soon able to develop new gestures of their own; but they still remained imitative and symbolic; they still had some reason behind them.

Such briefly is the theory which Sir Richard Paget expounds in his book, *Human Speech*, and abundantly illustrates by reference to Aryan roots, and to the language of primitive races. He further illustrates his thesis in a smaller book, called *Babel*,<sup>1</sup> from which the following example is taken. The most natural way to indicate *up* is to point up with the finger. This is the manual gesture for *up*. If we imitate this gesture with the tongue by first letting it lie flat on the floor of the mouth and then pointing the tip upwards till it touches the hard palate, we get the oral gesture for *up*. If now we accompany this oral gesture with the voice, we produce the sound *al*. And *al* is the Aryan root for *up*. The Latin *altus* means high; and the word *ala*, which is pronounced by moving the tongue up and down in imitation of the beating of a bird's wing, is the Latin word for *wing*. In Semitic *al* means to ascend, in Melanesian and Polynesian it means to climb up. All over the world, in fact, the root *al*, with its gestural variants *at*, *atl*, *an*, and *ar*—all produced by pointing upwards with the tongue—is associated with what is up. Witness the names of these mountains: Alps, Atlas, Andes, Ural, Himalaya, Alleghenny, and Ararat.

<sup>1</sup> *Babel, or the Past, Present, and Future of Human Speech*, pp. 31-4

Like all keen advocates of a special theory, Sir Richard Paget is severely critical of rival theories. He certainly scores a point against the *bow-wow* theory when he shows how indifferent an imitator of natural sounds even the modern man is, by referring to his absurd attempts to mimic the cry of the barn-door cock. The Englishman calls it *cock-a-doodle-do*, the German calls it *kikeriki*, and the Frenchman calls it *coquerico*.

The novel part of Sir Richard Paget's theory is the parallel he draws between the pantomime of the hand and the pantomime of the tongue and its neighbours. Apart from this factor others have put forward a similar theory, though none has ever pushed its implication so far, nor made it cover so wide a field. Sir Percy Nunn, for instance, in a book published ten years before *Human Speech*,<sup>1</sup> pointed out that certain words "seem ultimately to be oral gestures, sometimes residua of, or natural substitutes for, larger bodily gestures, sometimes 'sound-metaphors' of independent origin." He gives the words *you—me*, *there—here*, as illustrations of the principle. When a person says *you* clearly and emphatically, his lips shoot out towards the person he is addressing, as though he were pointing to him with his lips instead of his finger. In saying *me*, on the other hand, his lips are drawn inwards towards himself. By the same token the oral gesture is directed away from the speaker in saying *there*, and towards the speaker in saying *here*.

Let us now dismiss the category of words, and turn to the third category—the category of things. So large

<sup>1</sup> *Education: Its Data and First Principles*, p. 212.

is this category that it swallows up all the others; for there is nothing present on any occasion in the first two which may not on some other occasion appear in the third. For the third covers the whole range of experience; it embraces everything that the human mind can think about or talk about. When the psychologist speaks on his own subject he speaks about thoughts, and those thoughts must needs fall into the third category. When the philologist talks about words, those words are not then in the second category but in the third. In neither case, however, is the deserted category left empty; it is filled afresh. For we cannot think about thoughts without having other thoughts with which to think about them; and we cannot talk about words without using other words for the talking.

We therefore arrive at the general conclusion that as far as language is concerned, the three estates of the realm—the three agencies that make the process effective—are thoughts, words, and things; or, to put it with more scientific precision, thoughts, signs, and things signified. In every act of speech these three are of necessity present. Whether they are also present in every act of thought is a matter into which we have yet to inquire.

## CHAPTER II

### THOUGHTS WITHOUT WORDS

A tout instant, l'âme parle intérieurement sa pensée —  
VICTOR EGGER.

When the lady drank to the gentleman only with her eyes, and he pledged with his, was there no conversation because there was neither noun nor verb?—SAMUEL BUTLER •

WE have seen that for language three factors are necessary—thoughts, words, and things. Are the same three necessary for thought as well? Why the middle factor? Does the mind refuse to function unless there is a screen of words between it and the object to which it is attending? Can we, in fine, think without words? If the very widest meaning is given to the word “think”—if to be aware is to think, to be merely conscious is to think—then it is not only possible to think without words, but it is eminently normal and natural. I need no words to tell myself that I have a headache, nor do I need words to persuade myself that ginger is hot i’ the mouth. A rose needs no other name to smell as sweet; in fact it needs no name at all. My dog’s desire for a romp in the fields is no less urgent through the fact that he has no words in which to formulate his desire. Even if we leave all feeling and impulse out of the question and confine ourselves to cognition proper—to knowing pure and simple—the answer is still the same. We can and do think without words.

Our views of cognition have in recent years been

much clarified by the pioneer work of Professor Spearman. His first principle of cognition, which he calls the Apprehension of Experience, he puts into these words: "Any lived experience tends to evoke immediately a knowing of its characters and experienter."<sup>1</sup> By a "character" he means any aspect or attribute of the outer or inner world that can become an object of thought. This first law has also been expressed by him thus: "A person has more or less power to observe what goes on in his own mind. He not only feels, but knows what he feels; he not only strives, but knows that he strives; he not only knows, but knows that he knows."<sup>2</sup> This is a matter of immediate experience. There is no room here for a *tertium quid* to come between the active thinker and the object of his thought.

This is the very bed-rock of human knowledge—this awareness of something going on, or of something merely existing—an awareness that neither needs nor tolerates an intermediary of words. I will not labour this point, but merely put this question: If in order to know anything words are necessary, how did the words themselves come to be known? If a knowledge of oneself and one's surroundings is impossible without ordinary language, then are the deaf and dumb mere robots, and the brute creation, as indeed Descartes thought they were, mere automata.

The reader may be forgiven if at this point he impatiently protests that it is not a question of knowing without words, but of thinking without words—quite

<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of Intelligence and the Principles of Cognition*, p. 48. See also the Appendix to this book.

<sup>2</sup> *The Abilities of Man*, p. 164.

a different matter; for thinking involves some sort of activity on the part of the mind, something more than the mere quiescent awareness of things. Quite true; the mind doesn't stop at the apprehension of experience, it sets to work upon that experience. It attends, it observes, it compares, it remembers, it ponders, it meditates, it day-dreams, it sifts evidence, it draws conclusions, it develops a theme, and it solves a problem. In other words, it thinks, in the narrow sense of the term. Can this go on without words?

Nearly half a century ago this question was hotly discussed by the learned and by not a few of the unlearned. The storm was raised by Professor Max Muller of Oxford when he published in 1887 a book called *The Science of Thought*. In this book he flatly denied that it was possible to think without words; impossible, for instance, to conjure up the thought of a dog without using a name for the animal. He asks the reader to imagine a person making the attempt "Now the word dog," says the Professor, "is determinately suppressed; hound, cur, and all the rest, too, are strictly excluded. Then begins the work. 'Rise up, thou quadruped with ears and a wagging tail!' But alas! the charm is broken already. Quadruped, ears, tail, wagging, all are words that cannot be admitted." This device of the Professor's is a little too transparent. He tries to make us believe that because he cannot without using words describe to us a man trying to think about a dog, neither can the man himself think about a dog without using words too. It amounts to saying that a deaf-mute cannot call a dog to mind if the dog isn't actually there. Max Muller

was probably an out-and-out verbalist—a man devoid of all mental images except mental images of words. For it does not seem to have occurred to him that a visual image of a dog would suffice to conjure up the concept. Nor did he allow for the fact that words are not the only symbols which the mind can use as vehicles of thought.

Max Muller's arguments carry little weight to-day; but the doctrine, though moribund in England, has been galvanised into new life in America by a school of psychologists known as Behaviourists. In fact they have carried it one step further. For while Max Muller held that thought was always accompanied by language, the behaviourists hold that thought *is* language; or, which amounts to the same thing, that gentle excitation of the vocal organs which they describe as "suppressed speaking."

And now, good reader, let us try to solve this problem for ourselves. For we have the evidence close at hand. We can explore our own minds and take note of what we find there. In other words, we can introspect. But first a word of caution. The task we undertake is difficult. We are entering a land of shadows, where the lights are for ever shifting and changing. And the more intent we are on seeing the less there is to see. For the introspective mind is divided against itself; one part is observing while the other part is being observed; and the more there is of the one the less there is of the other. Auguste Comt , who seems to have been the first to point out this peculiarity of introspection, puts it like this: "In order to observe, your intellect must pause from activity; yet it is this very activity that you

want to observe. If you cannot effect the pause you cannot observe; if you do effect it there is nothing to observe.”<sup>1</sup>

The answer to this is that we need not—indeed we cannot—effect the pause. For the stage of human consciousness is not so narrow that the actors have to pass across it in single file, one having to make his exit before the other can make his entrance. It is wide and deep enough to permit of many actors performing at the same time, though only one perhaps is for the moment in the spotlight. Our lingering thoughts, thoughts that “vibrate in the memory,” can be studied in the fading phase. Introspection is in fact a kind of retrospection—a retrospection that follows close on the heel of the passing thought, and captures it before it has quite faded away. So we will assume that introspection, though difficult, is a possible and a valid process.

The next word of warning is against too ready a generalisation. A person has no right to assume that what takes place in his own mind is exactly what takes place in everybody else’s, or indeed in anybody else’s. Nobody who has read Galton’s *Inquiries into Human Faculty* can ever fall into that fallacy. The single introspector can, however, do something; he can swell the number of witnesses and increase the sum of evidence. And indeed he may do more; he can, if he really finds in his own mind thoughts without words, at once disprove the general thesis that thinking without words is impossible. A multitude of cases is not needed to do this; one is enough.

Then again there is the tyranny of the metaphor.

<sup>1</sup> *Positive Philosophy*, Chap. 1.

In speaking of things of the mind we are forced to make comparison with more familiar things—forced, in fact, to use metaphor. And after we have used the metaphor for all it is worth, the metaphor, unless we are careful, will begin to use us. It will carry us further than it is worth, and lead us to conclusions which are not warranted by the facts. William James, for instance, has accustomed us to thinking of consciousness as a stream. And a most excellent metaphor it is—so far as it goes. For although consciousness is very like a stream in some respects, it is very unlike it in others. A stream goes steadily on; by straight or devious ways it seeks the sea. But thought, as an active process, often comes to a dead end, retraces its course, and begins again; and it is for ever eddying round point after point of interest by which it is attracted and intrigued. Its tides and currents are far more complex than those of any river known to man, and its speed and volume far more varied.

This preamble over, I will try to tell what seems to me to happen in my own mind when I fall into reverie. I will make no mention of the interruptions that come from the outside—from the solicitations of sense: the sights and sounds that compel my attention, the physical discomforts that call for removal, the remarks that demand the courtesy of a reply—I will ignore all these and assume that some topic of interest is casting its lure upon my mind, and that my meditation is in full train, with my thoughts well in the saddle and the going good. The most obvious fact is the prevalence, if not the dominance, of words—single words, groups of words, phrases, clichés, slogans—all spoken silently to

myself—words that often cohere into neat and orderly sentences—sentences that sometimes fall into strict logical sequence—the good sentences freely interspersed with bad—the bad limping along as best they can—some mere skeletons of sentences—others spineless and shapeless (scarcely sentences at all)—others broken off in the middle—others again full of gaps—crowding and jostling with mere fragments of sentences—words that have lost their partners—subjects without verbs—participles hanging in the air—the whole punctuated with as many dashes as a Victorian lady's letter, or as this breathless and preposterous sentence.

In short, a medley of words. Yet not a medley without method, nor without meaning. The thought is coherent enough; and, given enough time, this disorderly procession of words could be tidied up into as sensible a piece of prose as one could wish to see. Note some of its peculiarities. Much of it is already organised. Most of its sentences are real predications with their parts properly articulated, and their grammar beyond reproach. And much of the rest consists of sentences complete but for a rift or two here and there. Even the disjointed words and phrases are fragments of real sentences, and in some way or other, lamely perhaps and obscurely, they do carry on the drift and burden of the thought.<sup>1</sup>

Words there are in plenty; or, to speak strictly, auditory images of words—faint echoes of real words—but there are other images as well, images which with me are largely visual—pictures thrown on the screen

<sup>1</sup> For a full and lucid account of inner speech see *La Parole Intérieure*, by Victor Egger.

of the imagination. These visual images sometimes accompany the words, sometimes deputise for them. They nearly always fill up the gaps. When, for instance, I think of a friend or an acquaintance, the first thing that leaps into my mind is a mental picture of him, or rather of some part of him—his face, his walk, the tone of his voice, an oft-worn garment, a characteristic gesture—anything that readily suggests him; and close on its track comes his name. Sometimes an appreciable interval separates the two, but the order is almost invariably the same: picture first, name afterwards. Sometimes the name refuses to come up at all, and the picture holds the field alone.

Note one inevitable consequence of this fact. When a person appears in a train of thought—I am still speaking of my own meditations—he is as a rule represented, not by a name but by a picture. The name would come, of course, if I would only wait for it; but in the hot pursuit of an idea I am too impatient to wait for it and so make shift to do without it. The result is that the names of people pass less frequently through my mind than do any other class of words, and they are in consequence more difficult to recall and more easy to forget. The psycho-analyst tells me that if I forget the name of a friend it is because I dislike him. But I am inclined to think that the real reason is, not a lack of love but a lack of repetition in the mind. It isn't that I do not think of him often enough, but that I do not think of his name often enough.

Though the more conspicuous contents of my mind in reverie have now been described, the inventory is not yet complete. There are other images besides

those already named—particularly images of movement, of direction, and of bare spatial relationships. They seem to be partly of visual and partly of muscular origin; but whatever their source they play no unimportant part in my train of thought. They bridge many of the verbal gaps, they complete the broken sentences, they often accompany the stream of words and give it a sense of moving in the right or in the wrong direction. Indeed, the more rapid and hurried the thought the more does it seem to depend for its support on this dynamic and geometric type of imagery.

So much for myself and my meditations. If now we extend the field and examine a reasonable amount of evidence derived from people of various ages, various races, and various conditions of life, we shall probably arrive at some such verdict as this. In the main we conduct our thinking in terms of internal speech, which is only partly organised into orderly prose. Much of it is incoherent and slipshod. Much of it is marred by blanks and fractures. Mixed with the words themselves, sometimes concurrent with them, sometimes taking their place, are a number of other symbols, generally in the form of visual or motor images. Of these symbols some are imitative of the objects to which they refer, others, like the words themselves, are purely conventional signs. Thus the private language with which we think is not quite the same as the public language through which we communicate our thoughts to others. They overlap but are not coincident. Our public language is verbal through and through; our private language is only partly verbal. Though con-

sisting in the main of words, it contains an admixture of private symbols which are quite incommunicable, and yet serve their purpose as instruments of thought.

To the question: Can we think without words? we can now give this reply: Yes, if we use other symbols instead. Pushing the question one step further, we ask: Can we think without symbols—without language of any kind, verbal or non-verbal? In other words, is there such a thing as pure thought; thought untainted with sensory material—unsullied by anything that derives either directly or indirectly from the seven senses, or however many senses there are? One thing is certain: thought is not happy working in the void—even if it can work there at all. It has a fondness for sense material. It seems to need something sensory with which to steady itself and maintain its grip on real experience. So it seeks anchorage in percepts and images, and makes free use of sensory symbols as present mementoes of absent objects and events.

Let us pause here to clarify our minds a little and get a more precise notion of what we mean by thought. Pray do not think that I am about to befog your mind (and mine) by a definition; for thought is one of those ultimate things which, like time and space, we must accept as irreducible elements of human experience. It will suffice for our purpose to state vaguely that thought is a characteristic activity of the self—perhaps the highest activity of the self. But although I cannot say precisely what thought is, I can say what it isn't. I can point to certain processes and products which, simply because they are mental, have sometimes been mistaken for thought.

Let me take my present experience to explain my meaning. I am writing near a window. Outside the window I see a tree, which I raise my head to look at. I not only look at it, I perceive it. The tree has now become to me a "percept"—an event in my mental history—a part of the panorama of my conscious life. But it is also a tree, an objective thing, a specimen of the flora of the planet on which I dwell. Are there then two trees, one inside my mind, and one outside—one which I call a percept of a tree and the other a tree *tout court*? Nay, there is only one tree, and the two so-called "things" are but two different aspects of the same thing. And the tree, even if I call it a percept, is not a thought. I know quite well that the philosopher, if he belong to the idealist school, will adduce arguments to prove that the tree as I know it is nothing but a modification of my own consciousness, and the tree as my neighbour knows it is nothing but a modification of my neighbour's consciousness; and that therefore the tree in its ultimate analysis is of the nature of thought. But I am not here concerned with an ultimate analysis of reality—if such a thing is possible—but with the scientist's view of experience. And the scientist's view of experience is the common-sense view of experience. And common sense says that a tree, whether I am looking at it or not, is a material object. No one but a philosopher or a fool would call it a thought.

Let us now suppose that I have moved away from my desk and can no longer see the tree. I try to think about the tree. Two things happen. The word "tree" leaps into my mind, then a mental picture

appears—a very vague and sketchy picture it is true, but still a picture. Is either of these images a thought? Neither of them has part or lot in the material world; neither exists for anybody but myself; each is a piece of my mind's private property. Are they not therefore thoughts? In the strict sense of the word, no. A mental image is not a thought. It may be regarded as a tool of thought, or as a vehicle of thought, or even as a product of thought; but it is not thought itself. "It is no more thought than a horse-shoe magnet is magnetism, or the copper wire which conducts the electric current the electric current itself. Thought is a spiritual thing: it may inform images, or make them, or use them; but it cannot *be* them.

Let us consider the whole episode afresh, this time from the point of view of the mind's activity. The fact that when I look at the tree I at once recognise it shows that my mind has been at work. It has related my present experience to certain past experiences; for it has assigned the object looked at to a definite group of objects previously seen. It has classified it as a tree. How the mind has performed this act of relating we do not know. It has not called up the images—there was no time. It has not called up the name till after the act of recognition has taken place. This act of recognition is an instance of what Professor Spearman has called "the eduction of relations," one of his basic principles of cognition.<sup>1</sup> It is an act of thought simple and ultimate. Explain it we cannot. It is true that many psychologists have tried to explain it by the

<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of Intelligence and the Principles of Cognition*, p. 63 ff. See also Appendix.

doctrine of dispositions, asserting that the present view of the tree excites a certain disposition left in my mind by previous views of trees, and that this excitation gives rise to the flash of recognition. But does this explain anything? It is nothing more than saying that recognition has taken place because past events have made it likely to take place. And this may safely be said of everything that ever happens. It is a key which enters every lock—and opens none of them.

If I recognise the object not only as a tree but as a laburnum tree, a still further eduction has taken place. And if I perceive that the tree is leafless I educe a fresh relation—that of substance and attribute. Close by is a sycamore tree which is at once seen to be larger than the laburnum. Here is educed a relation of size. Finally, I can imagine a tree as much larger than the sycamore as this is larger than the laburnum, and in so doing I have educed not a relation but a correlate. I have, in fact, exemplified the third of Spearman's three qualitative laws of cognition.

Since I am looking at the tree all the while, the mental activities which I have described above take place when I am apparently a passive spectator. I seem passive and I feel passive. I am aware of no stirring or strain; I am not specially conscious of any sort of mental activity. And yet the activity is there just the same. How much more active then is the mind when it deeply reflects on matters which have no concern with the present stimulation of sense! If the most rudimentary operations of the human mind are demonstrably suffused with thought, it may safely be inferred that the higher mental processes such as are

involved in reasoning and in acts of creative imagination owe their very life and substance to the activity of thought.

How much of this active thinking is accompanied by words? Nearly all of it. Even in the simple observation of the tree the words "sycamore tree" are likely to be present. It is still more likely that when the tree is compared with other trees phrases such as "larger than the laburnum" and "smaller than the plane" will accompany the comparison. It is most likely of ~~all~~—indeed it is almost certain—that words will play an indispensable rôle in such musings or soliloquies as I have described in the previous chapter. The more active the process the more need is there for words. No sooner, in fact, does the mind begin to work than it begins to talk; and the harder it works the more it talks.

Can it work without talking at all, in any sense of the word talking? We are back again at the question of pure thought, a question on which psychologists are by no means agreed. The only statement to which they would all subscribe is a hypothetical one: If thought can proceed without language it cannot proceed very far. For long and sustained trains of thought language is absolutely necessary.

For my own part I should leave out the *if*, for it seems to me that the evidence for pure thought is strong enough to exclude all reasonable doubt. Good linguists who not only speak several tongues, but think in them as well, confidently assert that they often have a wordless idea before they can make up their minds as to the language in which they should express it. And indeed the detachment of thought from its verbal

expression seems to be necessarily involved in translation from one language to another. When a Latin sentence is translated into English there must be a moment when it is neither Latin nor English—when it has ceased to be one and has not yet become the other. What is the state of the thought in the interval? If it is not pure thought, what is it? If, again, thought transference is, as many believe, a demonstrable fact, thought can pass from one person to some other person who is beyond the range of signals. Such thought must be wordless and signless. Granting all this, and admitting frankly that thought can function without language, we must also point out that it cannot function well without it; and that though it can do without it, it very rarely does.

When M. Jourdain, in Molière's comedy, is asked whether he knows Latin, he replies, "Yes, I know it, but proceed as though I didn't." The upshot of our inquiry is of similar import. With a greater regard for truth than M. Jourdain we may assert that thought is possible without language, but that the educator would be well advised to assume that it is not.

### CHAPTER III

## THE MEANINGS OF WORDS

What is the saddle of a thought? Why, a word, of course —O. W. HOLMES

Thought can think about everything more healthily and easily than about itself —SAMUEL BUTLER

IN 1923 a large and noteworthy book was published under the title, *The Meaning of Meaning*.<sup>1</sup> That a whole book should have been needed to explain so familiar a word, and a word which the dictionary dismisses in one short paragraph, will seem less surprising when it is learnt that the authors give sixteen different meanings of the term which have at various times been put forward by reputable writers. With many of those meanings we have no concern here, as they either imply an outworn philosophy, or make distinctions which would merely encumber our present inquiry.

Let us see what the dictionary can tell us. It derives the verb *to mean* from the Old English word *menan*, which seems to have meant to purpose, and connects it with the root *men-*, which means to think. It gives two current uses of the word: when it is predicated of a person it means to intend or purpose; when it is predicated of a thing it means to signify. In the following sentences it will be seen how one meaning glides into the other:

<sup>1</sup> *The Meaning of Meaning*, by C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards. Now in its third edition

- (i) I mean to turn over a new leaf.
- (ii) By leaf I mean the leaf of a book.
- (iii) The word leaf here means the leaf of a book.
- (iv) What does honour mean to people so degraded ?

As Dr. Gardiner has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the change from purpose to significance took place through our habit of transferring verbs from human subjects to neuter subjects. Meaning could at first be properly ascribed to human beings only; they alone could mean, or intend, or give significance. Dead things, such as signs or symbols, could of themselves mean nothing. But by an unconscious sort of personification the capacity to mean has been conferred on these inanimate things, and they too are now said to have meaning. Hence our four illustrative sentences may be paraphrased thus:

- (i) I intend to mend my ways.
- (ii) I intend the word *leaf* to apply to the leaf of a book only, not to the leaf of a tree, or to any other flat sheet.
- (iii) The word *leaf* is intended to be applied here to the leaf of a book only.
- (iv) To what kind of things can people so degraded apply the word *honour* ?

In the first sentence we find intention only; in the second and third intention plus applicability; in the last applicability only.

The dictionary is supposed to give us the meaning of any word in the language. What it does give us is a set of synonymous words or phrases—other words which may be substituted for the given word without seriously

<sup>1</sup> *The Theory of Speech and Language*, by Alan H. Gardiner, p. 100.

changing the sense. Some years ago Mr. Haig Brown, then headmaster of Charterhouse, gave one of his assistants a testimonial in which he described him as "generally good." When asked what he meant by "generally," he replied, "not particularly." That is the dictionary method—the method of equivalent words. But this does not help us in our search; for we are not now searching for the meaning of a word, but for the meaning of its meaning. What, for instance, have we in mind when we talk about the meaning of the word *green*? The word is a symbol of something which all normal human beings have experienced. That something is its meaning. So we must look at that something very closely. We see at once that it involves two distinct factors—a psychical process, and a piece of reality. The psychical process, taking place as it does in the minds of the persons concerned, is a private affair which is in itself unique and incommunicable. The piece of reality is in this case a certain quality in such material things as grass and the leaves of trees—a quality which is regarded by nobody as a private and personal possession, but as an intrinsic part of an external world common to all sentient creatures. Which of these two does the word *green* mean? Which of them does it symbolise? Is it the mental process, or is it the physical quality? Is it the thought or the thing? It seems to me that the only reasonable answer is that the word means both. It has two meanings, one inner and the other outer; one private and the other public. And the same is true of every other word. In its function as a symbol it extends two hands, one towards the inner world of

psychical experience, and the other towards the outer world of objective reality.

If the word is regarded as a stimulus, then the private meaning is the psychological response to that stimulus—a response that always involves a reference to certain things in the real world. These things—whether they be objects, relationships, or events—whether they be abstract ideas or concrete facts—these things constitute the area of reality to which the word is by the user deemed applicable. And if this area of applicability is the right one, if it is the one deemed legitimate by the bulk of the people speaking the language, then it accords with what I have called the public or impersonal meaning of the word. Not that this public meaning is original and self-sufficient; it is, as a matter of fact, derivative and dependent. It derives from the private meanings of a multitude of human minds; and upon them it depends for all the authority and validity that it possesses. And although it is steadied by certain conservative forces, notably by the lexicons and the literature of the nation, it is never absolutely fixed and immutable. Though it changes at a much slower rate, it is subject to the same vicissitudes as the individual meanings on which its authority rests.

This outer meaning is the “covenanted meaning” to which Samuel Butler alludes when he maintains that the three essentials of language are a sayer, a sayee, and a covenant; the covenant being an agreement that such and such a word should always refer to such and such a thing. No meeting of the covenanters was ever convened, no contract was ever signed, no oath was ever taken; and yet the covenant is as binding as

though these things had actually occurred. Nobody on this side of the looking-glass can say with Humpty Dumpty, "When *I* use a word it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." It must have the same objective meaning as the dictionary tries to delimit. It must cover the same area as custom has mapped out. And it is that area of reference, or area of applicability, or "area of meaning" as Dr. Gardiner calls it,<sup>1</sup> which will be found the more serviceable in our practical dealings with language and its uses. Compared with the fluidity of the inner or subjective meaning, the outer or objective meaning is solidity itself.

Dr. I. A. Richards distinguishes four different kinds of meaning, which he names respectively sense, feeling, tone, and intention.\* *Sense* is the substance of what the speaker says; it refers to something that exists or happens in the world of common experience. It is an affair of the intellect and not of the emotions. It may be regarded as a kind of mental pointing. The words used by the speaker point to something which he is thinking about and which he wants his listener to think about too. If the listener understands, the sense has been duly transmitted and the speaker has achieved his aim. It will be seen from this that *sense* roughly corresponds to what I have called the outer or public meaning.

*Feeling* is, in comparison, subjective or internal. Though attached to the sense it is readily distinguish-

<sup>1</sup> *The Theory of Speech and Language*, p. 36.

\* See *Practical Criticism*, pp. 179-88, 330-1, 353-7; and *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 125, 286.

able from it. I have no doubt that the reviewer who began his account of an illustrated book by saying, "This is the sort of book which one would pick up because of the pictures, and lay down because of the text," succeeded in conveying to the author his opinion; but I doubt whether he communicated his delight in his own wit.

By *tone* Dr. Richards means the attitude of the sayer to the sayee. Not only does the speaker modify his diction to suit his audience, but he modifies it to suit his own attitude towards his audience. His tone when he wishes to be conciliatory is very different from what it is when he wishes to be defiant.

Finally there is the *intention*, which is not easy to distinguish from *tone*. Irony is perhaps a good example of intention. The speaker says one thing and means just the opposite; and he intends the listener to turn the literal meaning inside out.

Here we have a core of meaning, the *sense*, surrounded like an onion by layer after layer of meaning; but, unlike the onion, with the layers getting more and more attenuated as they proceed from the centre. It is the core that counts for most. When the ordinary man talks about meaning he means the sense only; rarely does he mean the feeling as well; more rarely still does he bring in the other two elements.

Indeed, to learn the meaning of a word is to learn the things to which the word may properly be applied—to learn, in fact, its area of reference. And this is done by observation and experiment. We see the experimenting—the blundering, the correcting, the adjusting—going on day by day in the attempts of our children

to convey to us their ideas. When my own young daughter was about four she informed the family that there were men down the street making a doorstep of ointment. Our laughter told her that something was wrong. She had, in fact, given *ointment* so large an area of meaning that it included concrete. When she was being put to bed one summer evening her mother tried to soothe her into slumber by telling her that nature herself was going to by-bye.

"All the little birds have gone to rest," said the mother.

"And all the little butterflies and burglars have gone to bed," continued the child.

That time the burglar had got into the wrong area.

Jespersen tells us of a boy, nearly five years of age, who, on hearing that his father had seen the King, inquired, "Has he a head at both ends?" His King came from the realm of playing-cards.

Children in their happy-go-lucky way of acquiring the mother tongue are prone to pick up words first and learn their meanings later on—not so much by design as by accident. They readily learn to repeat strings of words without displaying the least curiosity as to their meaning. Sometimes indeed they seem surprised to find that they have a meaning at all. When they learn the Lord's Prayer at home or at school they do not at first connect it with any real experience; and even when they begin to invest the words with meaning, it is as likely as not the wrong meaning. When children in the lower classes of an elementary school are asked to write out the Lord's Prayer, they will often begin, "Our Father chart in Heaven" (without the

capitals), and proceed to write, "Harold be Thy name," or something else equally absurd. "Thy will be done" generally appears as "I will be done." In these instances, however, it is the wrong words they have seized upon, not the wrong meanings. They have substituted familiar words for the unfamiliar.

Sometimes, when their knowledge is verbally impeccable, a little Socratic questioning will reveal its hollowness. Many years ago I heard a class of young London children repeat in concert: "The sun rises in the East, and sets in the West." That seemed a simple everyday fact expressed in simple everyday language; and the children seemed to know it through and through. They could recite the words distinctly and correctly; they could write them down without a fault; they could readily answer such questions as, "Where does the sun rise?" or, "What happens to the sun when he reaches the West?"—any question, in fact, which did not change the words, or did not challenge their application. When, however, I asked, "Who has ever seen the sun rise?" I could get no response. Not one of them had ever witnessed the phenomenon. Nor were they able to tell me in what part of the sky the sun appears when he rises, or what he looks like when he does rise, or in what way he shows himself—suddenly or bit by bit. In fact, the verb *to rise* when applied to the sun was to them a word without a meaning.

I remember on another occasion hearing a young lad repeat with great fluency a long rigmarole about the annual and diurnal motions of the earth together with formal definitions of axis, poles, and equator.

After a little coaxing—for he did not seem anxious to impart the information—he told me what he thought the North Pole looked like: he thought it was thicker than a map-pole, not so thick as a lamp-post, and not so tall as either. It is not at all improbable that the notion was brought to birth by my questions, and that previous to that he had not troubled to attach any definite meaning to the words he had learnt by rote. His knowledge was parrot knowledge.

Although, as I have already said, it is arguable that a word is a symbol of a thought as well as of a thing, yet for practical purposes it is better to regard it as a symbol of a thing. In our attempts to use words with greater propriety and greater precision—attempts which are not confined to childhood, but continue, or should continue, from the cradle to the grave—we naturally look outwards instead of inwards; we keep a steady eye on the standard area of meaning. It is there that stability lies. Within the individual mind there is neither stability nor safety. For the private meaning which each man attaches to a word is a product of his own experience. He interprets the word in the light of his past acquaintance with its use, whether that use has been right or wrong. The word will have gathered round it associated memories not all of which are relevant to its proper use as a symbol—memories which tinge it with emotion and deflect its meaning from the true range of reference.

It is important, too, to remember that a word is not only a symbol; it is a percept as well. It is a "thing" in its own right. If spoken it is a sound; if written it is a shape. And as a thing it has qualities of its own.

It is long or short, smooth or harsh, sonorous or tinny, pronounced with ease or pronounced with difficulty. Even the sight of the word is not without its influence on the mind. One likes it to have comeliness and character. The word *yacht*, with all its eccentricities, has a friendliness about it which is absent when it appears as *yot*. Associations again, of course. But then we can never tell where the primary impression ends and the associated influence begins. The two are inextricably commingled.

Let us look at a few mixed instances. From a purely semantic point of view the word *ancient* is virtually equivalent to the word *old*, and the word *mariner* to the word *sailor*; yet *the ancient mariner* does not strike the same chord in the mind as *the old sailor*. With us, of course, it does not, for one of them has now associations which the other has not. But even with Coleridge it did not. He adopted the less familiar phrase, not only because it accorded with his professed views on the diction proper to poetry, but because he liked it better. Among words, as among people, we all have our likes and our dislikes. I, for instance, dislike the word *satisfactory*, partly because I don't like the look of the word, partly because on the whole I prefer short words to long, but mainly, I think, because I have so often seen it in school reports, where it means *unsatisfactory*. Another word on my black list is *conscientious*. This prejudice is, I think, due to the fact that many years ago the principal of a training college for women told me that when she had to write a testimonial for one of her students and could find nothing good to say about her she described her as *conscientious*. In spite of a

natural taste for slang I jib at some of our modern specimens. *Tripe*, for instance, as a word for rubbish, makes me shudder. *Junk*, on the other hand, I like; and *bulge* I like better still. *Bulge* is indeed a magnificent word. I once heard a little girl in a railway carriage say that the train gave her the *tickety-jerks*—an invention which is almost as good as *runcible*. But enough of my own likes and dislikes.

A writer can more easily conceal his dislikes than his likes; for his likes creep into his writings. Shelley, for instance, has a fondness for the word *ocean* and for rhyming it with *motion*, *emotion*, and *commotion*. I have just counted five instances in as many minutes. *Faint* is another of his favourites. In one of the stanzas of *The Indian Serenade*, "the wandering airs they faint," and in the next stanza the serenader himself dies and faints and fails. Edgar Poe need not have confessed his predilection for the long "o," especially when followed by an "r," for the fact is abundantly disclosed in his poetry and in his prose. Such words as *Lenore*, *Eleonora*, *Morella*, *roar*, *shore*, and *evermore* effloresce all over his pages. The word *sea* had a still greater fascination for Swinburne than *ocean* had for Shelley, a memento no doubt of his boyhood in the Isle of Wight. I have beside me a volume of selections from Swinburne's poetry, compiled by the poet himself, and published in 1898. It contains thirty-nine poems, and six of them end with the word *sea*.

It is pretty evident then that for its users a word has unique associations. It stirs up memories different from those of anybody else. It rings differently, it has different overtones, it reverberates differently in the

mind. To the prose writer who aims at clarity and precision this reverberation is a bane. To the poet it is a boon; for it is the very thing to which his poem makes its appeal. Without it his art would cease to exist.

The reader versed in the logic of the schools will no doubt have wondered why I have avoided the terms connotation and denotation. It is because the distinction between the connotation of a word and its denotation is not relevant to my scheme. It is not a distinction between inner and outer meanings—between subjective and objective, private and public. It is a distinction within the objective meaning itself. For the connotation is nothing but an analysis of the denotation. One is not more inward than the other; it is merely more abstract than the other.

So far we have been considering words in isolation. But words are rarely used in isolation: they are used in series; they are strung together to form sentences. And as soon as a word is used in a sentence its meaning is, as a rule, more closely defined. Suppose, for instance, I simply utter the word *box*. A number of possible applications emerge in the mind of the listener; and the number is very large; for *box* is not really one word but three words that happen to be spelled and pronounced in the same way. One word means a kind of tree, another a receptacle, and the third a slap with the hand. If I say, *The box tumbled over*, I narrow the area of meaning by excluding the box on the ear. If I say, *The box was empty*, I still further narrow the area by excluding the box-tree as well. The listener has now no right to hold in his mind as corresponding to

the word *box* anything but a receptacle. If I proceed to say, *The match-box was empty*, and then, *The match-box on the candlestick was empty*, the number of possible receptacles is progressively diminished; which is the same as saying that the chances of identification are progressively increased. The verb *tumbled*, the adjective *empty*, the noun *match* (used as an adjective), and the phrase *on the candlestick* have all helped to define the meaning of the noun *box*. It may also be shown that the word *box* has helped to define the meanings of the other words. In fact, when words are packed into a sentence they get squeezed a little out of shape. They have to sacrifice some of their waywardness in the interest of the sentence as a whole.

What is a word? That was a question once put to me at the close of a lecture, and my first impulse was to reply after the manner of Croce, who defined the Sublime as "everything that is or will be so called by those who have employed or shall employ the name." But a moment's reflection showed me that a significant point had been raised. Dr. Gardiner's definition of the word as the unit of language implies that there are no other units of language. But are not letters, syllables, predications, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs also units? Each one of them can enter as a whole into a variety of combinations. Each is a smaller unit used as a brick in building up a larger unit. What sort of a brick is a word? / If we define it as the smallest unit of language which has a distinct meaning of its own, it is not quite certain that we have excluded parts of words, such as affixes or roots. If we add the notion of mobility, we cannot say that words are

mobile and affixes are not. We can only say that words are more mobile than affixes. For even words cannot be shifted about to any part of the sentence we please—not in English, at any rate.

Nor must we regard a word as a unit which once fixed is fixed for all time. For words may split and multiply like microbes, or may run together like raindrops. History shows us single words of congested meaning breaking up into a number of separate words of attenuated meaning, such as happened to the Latin verbs; and even at the present day we can observe the opposite process taking place. For the last generation an automobile was a *motor car*; for the present generation it is a *motor-car*; for the next generation it will be a *motorcar*—unless the compound word is supplanted by the simple word *car*.

There is another tendency of words to cohere which has a signal influence on the use of language—the tendency to cohere into clichés or stock phrases. These clichés are not rare and exceptional; they enter freely into the common tissue of human speech. The intercourse of everyday life, whether in the home, or in the market-place, or in the counting-house, is mainly carried on by their aid. The ordinary greetings and gratulations—*Good morning*; *I hope you are well*; *the compliments of the season*—are all clichés of the most rigid type; they have been used thousands of times before, and used in precisely the same form. Even sentences show this tendency to ossify into formulas. *How do you do?*, for instance, is, as Jespersen has pointed out, an expression that cannot be varied. The words are welded together into one solid block. We cannot

change the subject of the sentence and ask *How does Wilkins do?* Nor can we change the tense and ask *How did you do yesterday*, or *How will you do to-morrow morning?* The four words have to be treated as one word, and that word undeclinable.

Sometimes words are joined together in couples and no man will put them asunder, or even reverse their order. We can, for instance, say that a thing is *spick and span*, but we cannot say that it is *spick*, nor that it is *span*, nor yet that it is *span and spick*. *Spick and span* is an indissoluble cliché which can be matched by scores of others.

A business letter is obviously one mass of clichés. Formula follows formula right through from salutation to signature, and the same phrases appear in letter after letter. What is not so obvious is that the same is true of sermons, public speeches, B.B.C. announcements, leading articles in the daily papers, and those productions which, in happier financial days, we used to call penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers.<sup>1</sup> And this indeed is almost inevitable. To build up word by word a new expression to fit every commonplace idea when quite good ready-made expressions are close at hand is sheer waste of mental energy. And for practical purposes the product would be inferior. In fact clichés are labour-saving devices which enable us to construct sentences with larger units than words. They enable us to use blocks instead of bricks.

Indeed a cliché is twice blessed; it blesseth him that speaks and him that hears. For not only do stock phrases enable the hearer to take in the meaning in

<sup>1</sup> See *The Writing of English*, by W. T. Brewster, p. 13.

large masses, but they make him feel more at home with both the speaker and the topic. Like snatches of a familiar tune, they run along well-worn grooves in his brain, and carry on the sense with a minimum of fatigue. It follows that even the most original and racy of speakers will have to depend for the bulk and body of his speech on familiar phrases with which he intermingles sparingly his own home-made wit. Too meagre a background of the familiar would make the speech harsh to hear and hard to follow. Salt is good, but too much salt makes the porridge uneatable.

Why, then, the great outcry raised by stylists against clichés? Are their strictures wholly undeserved? Nay, I agree with the stylists. But there are clichés and clichés. And it will be observed that the clichés against which the stylist directs his shafts are not of the useful sort but of the decorative sort. What he objects to is not the *How do you do?* variety but the *Sweets to the sweet* variety. It is a vice to which the half-educated are more hopelessly addicted than the vulgar. Provincial newspapers often yield to its seductions. Every occasion is an *auspicious occasion*, every major a *worthy major*, every workman a *horny-handed son of toil*. The oyster is a *succulent bi-valve* and the picnic lunch is a *cold collation*. When the town councillors meet in the council chamber they become *the city fathers in conclave assembled*.

With real highbrows the disease breaks out in Latin. The metaphysician has his *summum bonum*, his *totus teres atque rotundus*, and his *entia non sunt multiplicanda præter necessitatem*; and the logician has his *petitio principii*, his

*argumentum ad hominem* and his *post hoc non propter hoc*. Indeed, to be quite frank, we are none of us free from the complaint. Let us therefore cherish the useful cliché, and not frown too severely on his decorative brother.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE SENTENCE

Yet let it not your anxious Mind perturb  
Should Grammar's Law your Diction fail to curb:  
Be comforted, it is like Tacitus:  
'Tis mostly done by leaving out the verb.—A. D. GODLEY.

NOBODY has any difficulty in picking out sentences from the printed page, for the author (or the printer) has already marked them off. With all the sentences except the first he has placed one period at the head and another at the tail. So a sentence is the discourse between two points; the two points being consecutive full stops. Well, what shall we say to this passage from D'Arcy Thompson's *Day Dreams of a Schoolmaster*?

Yes, Reader, I am a Hellenist. I am at the end of my third volume, and am going to live happy ever afterwards. I have reached Ithaca. A little tired and battered. But I have reached Ithaca.

Waiving for the moment the fact that punctuation is largely a matter of fashion and of personal taste, we have to inquire on what principle the author (or the printer) cuts up the discourse into lengths called sentences. What, in fine, is a sentence? Upon this point there is a remarkable unanimity of opinion among the rank and file of grammarians, and an equally remarkable difference of opinion among philosophers and psychologists. Dictionaries and grammars tell us boldly and cheerfully that a sentence is a set of words

which express a complete thought. The only exception I can find is Morris, who says it is a complete thought put into words. To him a sentence is essentially a thought, and belongs by right to the first of our three categories; but to the huge majority it is essentially a group of words, and belongs to the second. But none of our three categories, thoughts, words, and things, can be studied in isolation, for they are all three joined together by subtle bonds of relationship. So that if one is kept in the foreground of consciousness the other two will be seen lurking in the background. In fact, the set of words which constitutes a sentence owes all its cohesion and unity to the thought that stands behind it. The sentence is one because the thought is one. It seems to follow from this that a separate word cannot have a whole thought to itself; it has to content itself with a fragment. There are some, indeed, who go so far as to assert that a word has no meaning at all, except what it acquires by forming part of the sentence community.

Those who are prone to glorify the sentence unduly are no less prone to vilify the word unduly. Bosanquet, in his zeal for exalting the sentence, points out<sup>1</sup> that the ancient Greeks did not separate their words in writing, and that Aristotle had no simple class name corresponding to our term *word*. He neglects, however, to add that the Greeks did not separate their sentences either, and that the only visible units in their manuscripts were letters. If we are to accept without qualification the absurd inference that words have no meanings, the only sensible thing to do is to make

<sup>1</sup> *The Essentials of Logic*, p. 86.

a bonfire of all our dictionaries and all our encyclopædias.

Let us carefully examine the assertion that a sentence contains a complete thought. I open at random a volume of Macaulay's *Essays* and my eye alights on the sentence, *This was denied to him*. Can any one maintain that the thought here is complete? As we are not told what was denied, nor to whom it was denied, we need for the completion of the sense two pieces of information from the outside. So the thought is not complete in the sense of being self-contained. In what sense then is it complete?

With the preceding sentence prefixed the passage runs: *The hand of death was upon him: he knew it; and the only wish which he uttered was that he might die sword in hand. This was denied to him*. We are now given a clue to the meaning of *this* in the second sentence, but we are still left in the dark as to the meaning of *him*. We have, in fact, to go back nearly half a page before we discover that the author is talking all along about Lord Byron. The first of the two sentences contains three statements; the last sentence contains but one. What I want to know is this: on what principle (except that of arbitrary punctuation, which is not a principle at all) can completeness of meaning be withheld from each of the first three statements and granted to the fourth? Why is the thought embodied in *The hand of death was upon him* regarded as incomplete, and the thought embodied in *This was denied to him* as complete? It is beside the mark to say that the first three statements are really sentences. If so, why are they not punctuated as sentences? Neither Macaulay nor

his reading public regarded them as sentences; nor would any modern grammarian so regard them. Clauses if you like; predications if you like; but not sentences.

It is, in fact, to its inherent insufficiency that a sentence, as part of continuous discourse, often owes its vitality and fitness. By leaning on other sentences it shares and transmits their warmth. By sending out threads backwards and forwards it helps to knit the whole fabric into one seamless piece. Remove a good sentence from a good paragraph and you leave behind, not a gap with clean-cut edges, but an ugly rent with broken threads at both ends. Even when a sentence seems to stand by itself—when it is a simple remark, or exclamation—its isolation is an isolation of words, not of thought. For its meaning is obscure and incomplete without reference to the circumstances in which it was uttered.

Conscious perhaps of the difficulty he would find in defending the complete thought theory of the sentence, Professor Sonnenschein has taken refuge in vague description, which, nevertheless, he ventures to call a definition; thus: DEFINITION: *A sentence is a group of words which makes sense*<sup>1</sup> But does not the title of a book make sense? And a headline in a newspaper? And the rubric of a text? Are the following groups of words sense or nonsense? *The Merchant of Venice, A Tale of Two Cities, Football Results, Big Fire in the City, Assassination of Bulgarian Prime Minister*. And does not a paragraph in a book, or a stanza of a poem, or indeed the book or the poem itself, consist of a group of words, and

<sup>1</sup> *A New Grammar, Part I, p. 11.*

do not those words make sense? Not always perhaps, but as a general rule? No, no, this definition will never do. As a definition it is not only wrong, but is not even usefully wrong.

I do not, mark you, deny the unity of the sentence; what I do deny is that its unity is a unity of thought. And I further deny that it is the only unit in language. The word has a unity of its own; and so has the paragraph. And so in poetry have the foot, and the line, and the stanza.

If the unity of the sentence is not to be found in the realm of thought, where is it to be found? The answer given by Dr. Alan H. Gardiner is that it is in the realm of will or purpose. In his book *The Theory of Speech and Language* he draws a distinction between speech and language, regarding language as the science, and speech as its application. Speech, in fact, is language in action. In consonance with this terminology he considers the word to be the unit of language, and the sentence the unit of speech. And here is his definition of a sentence: *A sentence is a word or set of words revealing an intelligible purpose.*<sup>1</sup> To meet the objection that this affords no quantitative criterion, and that it would apply to a sermon as well as to a sentence, he extends his definition as follows: *A sentence is a word or set of words followed by a pause and revealing an intelligible purpose.*<sup>2</sup> The purpose is a communicative purpose. The speaker tries to influence the listener in some way; he tries to make him attend to the same thing as he himself is attending to, or to think the same thought, or to accept the same point of view. Or, if

<sup>1</sup> *The Theory of Speech and Language*, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

the sentence happens to be a command or a question, the aim may be to get the listener to do something or to supply some sort of information.

The reason for the pause and for its incidence has evidently exercised the author's mind, for later on in the book he has another shot at a definition, viz. : *A sentence is an utterance which makes just as long a communication as the speaker has intended to make before giving himself a rest.*

One fails to be wholly satisfied with this definition, for the pause (or rest) is by no means as distinctive a mark as one could wish. It is too freakish and lawless; and its length is too variable. There is not only the pause direct, but the pause rhetorical and the pause unintentional—the pause when one can't help it. The pause rhetorical is of two kinds, both purposive: one being a laudable device for lending force to a word or a phrase, the other a piece of sheer pomposity; as, for instance, when a platform orator spreads his speech like this: *Mr. Chairman—ladies and gentlemen—I stand here—on this auspicious occasion—as a representative—of a dense constituency* The next kind of pause comes when the speaker is trying to think of a word and hesitates till it comes. Then again there is the pause of the speaker who rushes his sentences and runs them into one another—a pause which, though it may come in the right place, is so brief as to escape detection. So not only has the pause other things to do besides marking the end of a sentence, but it does not always do the marking itself well.

And yet one cannot help perceiving that there is a difference in the "feel" of the pause that comes at the

end of a sentence—a difference that marks it off from every other sort of pause. To be able to explain that “feel” would be to discover the secret of the sentence. The best we can do is to travel in a circle and come back to the speaker’s purpose, and then note the fact that the pause is only one of his means of indicating his intention to close the sentence at that point. He has other means; they all combine to suggest his saying. This is a sentence because it is my will and pleasure that it should be a sentence. It is as much of my full purpose as I care to reveal at the very moment—as much of my meaning as I wish to deliver in one handful. In speaking he conveys all this by his intonation, his gestures, and the pause at the end. In writing he says it with a full stop—or should say it with a full stop.

When Scott wrote,

The way was long, the wind was cold,  
The minstrel was infirm and old.

he meant the lines to be one sentence. But a modern prose writer might well mean the same words to be three sentences; in which case he would punctuate them like this: *The way was long. The wind was cold. The minstrel was infirm and old.* Not that there is anything specially modern in this punctuation. It may be paralleled by a few passages from Lamb and by many passages from Macaulay. And indeed the most punctilious of purists would never think of challenging sentences with so complete an equipment of subject and predicate and so free from any mark of subordination. He would, however, look askance at Kipling’s recur-

rent *Which is another story* being given the full status of a sentence. And as for D'Arcy Thompson's *A little tired and battered*,<sup>1</sup> that would simply be condemned as a piece of illiteracy. And yet if our theory is sound, these suspects have all the necessary credentials and are in point of fact sentences good and true.

Although I cannot regard Dr. Gardiner's definition as free from imperfections, I consider it the best we have. By shifting the focus of attention from thought to purpose he has, I believe, given us the right clue to the unity of the sentence; and has led us to see why so many of our old disputes have proved so sterile. For if it can be demonstrated that a sentence may fulfil its proper function as a medium of will or purpose without consisting of a subject and a predicate, and if it can further be demonstrated that it need not possess even a finite verb, then it is no longer possible to identify a sentence with a predication. And demonstrated it can be. Dr. Gardiner has shown quite clearly that in certain circumstances the word *Rain!* may form a sentence by itself,<sup>2</sup> and that *What a bore!* is no less adequate as a sentence than as a response.

And Jespersen, having traced the sentence back to its beginnings among our remote progenitors, has judged it to consist of a series of sounds which is neither a word nor a group of words but the snatch of a song—a wordless song.<sup>3</sup> Songs without words revert to original music, and “hey-and-a-ho-and-a-hey-nonino” reverts to original speech. Man, in fact, began speaking in auditory signs (probably musical) which were used as

<sup>1</sup> See p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Language*, p. 432 ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 71 ff.

wholes and were only gradually, and after long ages, differentiated into words. But these wholes were always sentences—always used as means of influencing the thoughts, feelings, and acts of others. Even in the grammatical textbooks of to-day the word-sentence receives some recognition; for they commonly teach that *Yes* and *No* are to be regarded as sentences in themselves.

Samuel Butler goes further still. He maintains that we may have a sentence without words at all. In support of this view he tells a story of Mrs. Bentley, wife of the famous Dr. Bentley of Trinity College, Cambridge. When she wanted beer, instead of sending a written or an oral message to the college buttry, she sent her snuff-box. That brought the beer. For it had been agreed between Mrs. Bentley and the butler that the snuff-box should mean *Beer, please*. There were here the conditions necessary and sufficient for authentic language—a sayer, a sayee, and a covenant. “It may sound strange to say,” the author goes on to remark,<sup>1</sup> “that one might take a pinch of snuff out of a sentence, but if the servant had helped him or herself to a pinch while carrying it to the buttry this is what would have been done; for if a snuff-box can say ‘Send me a quart of beer’ so efficiently that the beer is sent, it is impossible to say that it is not a *bona fide* sentence.”

There is little doubt that the sentence, as used by our primitive forbears, though heavily charged with will and emotion, was but lightly loaded with thought. It was later in the history of the race, when the pressure

<sup>1</sup> *Selected Essays* (Jonathan Cape), p. 235.

of practical needs began to abate, that language, which had proved so potent an instrument of will, began to be used more freely as an instrument of thought. The speaker, instead of always suggesting to the listener: I want you to act like this, got into the way of suggesting: I want you to think like this. And it was, I venture to assert, through his desire to make his listener think in a certain way that he began to mould his speech into that particular pattern of subject and predicate to which we give the name predication. For thinking and predication seem to go hand in hand. And since no sentence can convey a purpose without communicating thought, it follows that every sentence, however primitive or elemental, can be expressed as another sentence which contains at least one subject and one predicate.

A sentence has a meaning, and the words of which it is composed have meanings. How are these meanings related? How do the meanings of the separate words contribute to the meaning of the sentence? For it is the meaning of the sentence that is the goal; the words themselves are but sign-posts pointing to that goal. And down comes any arm of the sign-post that happens to point in the wrong direction. For each word as it is uttered yields up just as much of its meaning as will tend to make the whole sentence intelligible; the rest is suppressed. And when the last word is uttered the goal is reached and the sentence is understood. That at any rate is what happens when we construct our sentences—when we build them up out of words. But we don't build up all our sentences afresh; we use many of them ready-built. Some of

them indeed are not open to analysis except at the risk of being misunderstood. They belong to the clichés which I described in the last chapter. *Don't mention it* is a good example. If the separate words are taken as clues to the meaning of the sentences they will prove false clues. The sentence does not mean *Don't* plus *mention* plus *it*; for it is scarcely more than a deprecatory gesture which implies: *You make too much of my slight services*. It is an expression which the speaker rolls off in one piece and which the listener must bolt whole: if he chews it he will get the wrong sense.

A short time ago I called at a picture-show to see a few water-colour drawings that took my fancy. The assistant, a punctiliously polite young man, followed me round the gallery and responded to all my remarks with the formula *Not at all* "I like that picture, but the price is beyond my purse." *Not at all*. "I think I'll bring my wife to look at them" *Not at all*. I left him bowing at the door and muttering *Not at all, not at all*. Now *Not at all* taken literally was not at all what he meant. His tone of voice and general demeanour showed me that it was merely a polite and reassuring gesture. Sometimes it seemed to be saying: *We don't in the least mind if you don't buy any of the pictures. These hard times, sir—we quite understand.*

A Frenchman who had spent a few years in England and had made sturdy efforts to acquire the English tongue confessed that there was one word which completely baffled him. He had heard it on everybody's lips, but had utterly failed to find it in any dictionary. The word was *Zattledoo*.

The sentence has an advantage over the word in

being able to convey a general sense of its meaning by the mere intonation or cadence with which it is spoken; in other words, by its tune. If somebody asks you a question and you reply, *I don't know*, you do not say the words at a dead level; you give them a tune. Sometimes, indeed, you give the tune without the words; you just hum them. And you are understood just the same. It's not an improvised tune; it's a conventional one—one that has accompanied the words times without number. So often, indeed, that the tune alone conveys the sense just as well as the tune and words together. There is sometimes more than one tune for the same set of words; there is, for instance, more than one for *I don't know*. But it is never an arbitrary tune which anyone can change at will. It has always been fixed and made familiar by social custom and abundant practice. In using these tunes in this way we are back again at the place where, according to Jespersen, the sentence started its long career down the ages.

The fact that these cadences are conventional, and that the English conventions are different from the French, and the French different from the German or the Italian, sets up a linguistic barrier between nation and nation, second only in strength to that of the vocabularies themselves. So strange are French cadences to the Englishman's ear that he may be quite familiar with French literature, and quite familiar with the sounds of individual words, and yet fail deplorably to follow a simple French conversation. He does not know the tunes. I myself read French far more easily than I read Welsh; yet I can understand nearly everything that is said in Welsh, however

rapidly it is spoken; and precious little of what is rapidly said in French—unless of course it is spoken by an Englishman; then I understand it quite well. The reason is simple: I know the English tunes, and I know the Welsh tunes, but I don't know the French tunes.

It is clear, therefore, that the sense of a sentence is not always built up from the senses of the component words. Sometimes several words are welded together and have to be taken *en bloc*. Sometimes the whole sentence has to be taken *en bloc*. And the *en bloc* meaning of the sentence may even contradict the cumulative meaning of the individual words. If I say, *Mr. X is lazy and never does more work than he can help*, everybody understands what I mean and sees nothing strange about the expression. But if I had said, *Mr. X never does more work than he cannot help*,<sup>1</sup> he would have thought I was talking nonsense. Yet it is the first sentence that is nonsense, and is accepted as sense only because convention has given the whole sentence a meaning which the meanings of the separate words do not justify.

Another instance. A small boy is accused of an offence, plausibly denies his guilt, and gets off. Somebody remarks, *I shouldn't wonder if the young rascal hadn't done it after all*. That remark would be taken by the listeners to mean the same as if he had said, *I shouldn't wonder if the young rascal had done it after all*. Here we have two logically contradictory sentences saying precisely the same thing.

If further proof be needed that intimations of mean-

<sup>1</sup> The sense becomes clearer if the sentence is expanded thus: *Mr. X never does more work than that which he can't help doing*.

ing, and pretty strong intimations too, come from sources other than the words, let the following experiment be tried. A places six pennies in the palm of his hand, and shows them to B. Then a conversation like this takes place:

A. How many pennies have I in my hand ?

B. Six.

A. I say there are five.

B. I say there are six.

A. Will you give me a penny if I am wrong.

B. Certainly.

A. Well, I am wrong. Hand over the penny.

It is amazing how readily people fall into this simple trap. B is so ensnared by the general situation together with the form and cadence of the question, *Will you give me a penny if I am wrong?* that he interprets the question as though it had been either *Will you give me a penny if you are wrong?* or *Will you give me a penny if I am right?* He responds to the expected question, not to the actual question.

To sum up, the meaning of a spoken sentence is something towards which several forces converge, and to which several factors contribute. The most generous contribution comes as a rule from the component words. But the words do not always act singly; they sometimes combine into groups known as clichés, formulas, or stock phrases; and each of these groups delivers a unitary meaning which sometimes owes little or nothing to the individual words of which it is composed. The group functions as a single word. Then again the meaning of many familiar salutations, responses, and set forms of expression is partly con-

veyed by the cadence—by the modulation and melody of the speaker's voice. And there are times when the cadence can carry the whole of the meaning. Finally, the context—not merely the verbal context but the whole situation, the full *mise en scène* of the little drama—often makes it easy to interpret many a sentence which, if spoken on an empty stage, would have been wholly unintelligible.

## CHAPTER V

### PREDICATION

Intelligence, in the strict sense of the word, ultimately consists in a seizing of relations —ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER.

IF we examine a piece of continuous discourse in any of the Indo-European tongues we discover therein a certain definite pattern. First something is mentioned (the subject), and then something is said about it (the predicate). Subject and predicate together make a unit of pattern, which, by continuous repetition, forms the fabric of the discourse. Subject—predicate; subject—predicate; subject—predicate; and so on to the end of the chapter. And there is nothing left over; except perhaps a few interjections or exclamatory phrases, which either form no essential part of the discourse, or may be brought into it by a slight change in the wording—a change which makes no difference to the meaning.

For this unit of pattern we have no familiar name. We cannot call it a sentence, for it forms, as a rule, only part of a sentence. We cannot call it a clause, because it can form a sentence by itself, while a clause cannot. The only name we can give it is a predication. The term is, unfortunately, ambiguous, for it may mean either a process or a product; it may mean the act of saying something about a subject, or it may mean the words in which that saying is expressed. But so accustomed are we to the same sort of ambiguity in

other words (*reason*, for instance, and *judgment*) that we may trust the context to single out the right significance.

The question at once arises: is this merely a social custom—a linguistic habit into which our Aryan ancestors fell, and which has been retained by their widely scattered descendants? Or is it due to something deeper—something inherent in the human mind itself? In other words, is this rhythmic movement in Aryan languages due to accident, or to a rhythmic movement of thought that compels the language by which it is expressed to keep in step? If we find that all the dwellers upon earth, “Parthians and Medes and Elamites,” Mongols and Semites as well as Aryans, and indeed savages in remote quarters of the globe; if we find that they all speak with the same pattern of subject and predicate—and this, as a matter of fact, is what we do find—then we begin to suspect that predication is inherent in language itself; and that it is inherent in language itself because it is inherent in thought itself.

In languages of alien origin predication is not always of the same shape and form as in our own tongue; but the predication is always there. Sometimes there is no verb; sometimes the predicate comes before the subject; sometimes the verb, when there is a verb, comes at the beginning instead of the middle or the end. *A wonderful man, your father!* represents in English a type of sentence which, according to Dr. Gardiner, is natural and normal in Old Egyptian; and it can, it seems, be matched by similar constructions in Hebrew and in Arabic. And there is no difficulty here in

picking out the predicate. Even in the less-developed speech of savages, where the grammatical categories have not yet come into being, and a number of nouns are found side by side, it is always possible for those who understand the language to say which nouns are meant as subjects and which as predicates.

Still looking at a predication from the verbal side and regarding it as a series of words, we notice that in English the series is, on an average, eight words long. That is, in ordinary speech, not in formal written composition. An educated man, in everyday conversation, or in unprepared public speaking, makes use of predications which, as a rule, run to an average of eight words. Some of his predications will be short, others will be long; some will be confined to two or three words, others will stretch to fourteen or fifteen; but the average will not be very far from eight.

Children and uneducated people use shorter predications and seem to favour an average of six. Eloquent people, on the other hand, and especially grandiloquent people, will extend the average to ten. But taking people all round, young and old, wise and foolish, their average predications are eight words long.

Connect with this fact the lengths of popular proverbs. Here are a few to be looked at:

- A stitch in time saves nine. (6)
- Birds of a feather flock together. (6)
- All is not gold that glitters. (6)
- Necessity is the mother of invention. (6)
- Half a loaf is better than no bread. (8)
- Don't put all your eggs in one basket. (8)

Don't count your chickens before they are hatched. (8)

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth. (8)

It's a long lane that has no turning. (8)

Those who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. (9)

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. (11)

Here again eight seems to be the average.

Let us now look at certain standard poems and count the number of words in a line. We find that the average is about eight in Homer's *Iliad* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*<sup>1</sup>. The same is true of the following: Shakespeare's sonnets, Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Lycidas*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Gray's *Elegy*, *The Burial of Sir John Moore*, Browning's *Ring and the Book*, and many other standard poems. In ballad poetry, such as *The Ancient Mariner*, the number is reduced to six.

Is not this ubiquity of the eight-word group a remarkable coincidence? Or is it more than a coincidence? Is it fantastic to believe that it is rooted in some special faculty—or limitation of faculty—in human nature? Why eight words? If it had been seven it would have fallen in with traditional belief, and have found its rank among the seven wonders of the world, the seven wise men of Greece, the seven golden candlesticks, the seven notes in the diatonic scale, the seven colours of the spectrum, and the Seven Stars where the buses stop. Truth to tell I tried to make it seven, but

<sup>1</sup> The average number of words per line in the first hundred lines of *The Iliad* is 7.27, and in the first hundred lines of *The Inferno* 7.24. The lines of the *Aeneid* are shorter. The average is 6.5.

statistics, which are as stubborn as the facts on which they are founded, were dead against me, and insisted on producing eight each time. We have, therefore, to find reasons for the eight.

For the speaker the eight-word group makes a good lungful of words. They can be uttered with ease in one breath. He who runs may shout them and feel no strain. To the listener, on the other hand, it is a convenient earful of words. He can take them in without the least effort; for the first word has not ceased echoing in his brain when the last is heard—a fact of no small consequence in the reading of poetry. As soon as more than seven words separate one rhyme from another, there begins to be a danger of the echo being lost and the rhymes failing of their effect.

To both speaker and hearer the group of eight forms a comfortable mindful of words. They put no strain on the span of attention. Being an easy number to think, to speak, to hear, to retain, and to recall, they form a neat little parcel for a man to carry about with him or to stow away in his head. The mind of even the slow-witted can easily compass a larger number, and indeed must do so at times, for eight is the average of numbers that vary over a fairly wide range; but the stress of the larger numbers must not come too often if the mind of the listener is to be kept at continuous attention.

If a more diligent dabbler in statistics should prove that I am wrong in my estimate of the size of the group, and should find it to be seven after all, or even nine or ten, the above remarks will, *mutatis mutandis*, still hold good—or at least as good as they were before.

Leaving now this speculative field, let us return to a

more sober scrutiny of predication. Let us look at the mental side of it, as distinct from the verbal side. On this both the logician and the psychologist have something to say.

Much discussion has taken place among psychologists as to whether the act of predication is an act of analysis or an act of synthesis. Does it take things apart or does it put them together? When, many years ago, I began to read psychology I soon made the discovery that nobody had ever asserted that a certain mental process was analytic without somebody else coming along to claim that it was synthetic. There is an old story of two men in an inn who after a long discussion as to whether the beast painted on the sign-board was a red lion or a white hart went outside to see, and found that there was a red lion on one side and a white hart on the other. Analysis and synthesis are a similar pair. Such an assertion as *In that northern clime the days of winter are dreary in the extreme* implies that if we examine those winter days (denotation) and analyse them into their characteristics (connotation) we shall find extreme dreariness among the number. That is analysis. In making the assertion itself we combine the notion of extreme dreariness with the notion of winter days in that special climate. That is synthesis. So Thomas Hobbes was right after all when he said that thinking is addition and subtraction. Ideas are put together and are taken away again. And the partisans of both theories are right so far as they go; they are right in what they assert and wrong in what they deny.

Professor Stout has dealt with the matter in another

way. He maintains that predication is based on the natural tendency of the mind to move towards a goal. Thought marches; and marches to the rhythm of subject and predicate. The foot that is planted on the ground represents the subject and the foot that is moving forward in the air is the predicate. All the stability is in the subject, all the movement in the predicate. The subject of each successive predication, however, is not the grammatical subject; it is the grammatical subject with its meaning modified by all that has been said before. The sense cumulates from subject to subject. Which again supports my view that no sentence in continuous discourse expresses in itself a complete thought.

Professor Spearman probes more deeply into the problem. He shows us more clearly what this mental headway means. For he has analysed in a way that nobody has done before the various acts of knowing, or cognising, and has resolved them into three simple processes which he severally calls: the apprehension of experience, the eduction of relations, and the eduction of correlates.<sup>1</sup> These three processes are all involved in nearly every act of thought or of speech. The first gives the mind the material on which to work; the other two reveal the nature of the work. When the intellect is active it is either educing relations or educing correlates, it is concerned in either noting the relation between A and B (items which Professor Spearman terms fundamentals or correlates), or in finding either A or B if it happens to be missing.

<sup>1</sup> See pp 38 and 39. For a fuller account of these processes, see Appendix.

This is eduction in its simplest form. But it does not always take place in its simplest form. For the number of fundamentals is not confined to two; it may be extended indefinitely. And the fundamentals need not be substantive supports; they may be relations. So we may have relations between relations; and relations between those new relations and other relations. And thus the bonds of relationship become very numerous and very complex; and they often inextricably intertwine. Indeed the number of bonds involved in a simple act of predication form so intricate a meshwork that it defies the wit of man to disentangle it. Let us think of the number of things that may serve as fundamentals: the speaker, the listener, the sentence, the predication, the subject, the predicate, the individual words, the general situation, and the meanings that are attached to all the vocables used. Then let us try to estimate the number of possible combinations between them. Then let us remember that we have now a new series of possible fundamentals. But we need pursue the inquiry no further; it is abundantly clear that the relationships are both numerous and perplexing.

A predication therefore is a mass of eductions. But one eduction stands out from the mass—the one which relates the meaning of the subject to the meaning of the predicate. How does this special eduction differ from the others? What is its hall-mark—its patent of nobility? *The leaves are faded* is a predication; *the faded leaves* is not. Yet both involve eductions of precisely the same kind. *The dentist removed the source of the trouble* is a predication. The tooth *caused* the trouble; the dentist *caused* the removal of the tooth. Two

similar eductions (both are concerned with causal relations) are expressed in the same sentence; yet one forms a predication and the other does not. Why is this?

A predication is not only a mass of eductions; it is also a mass of predications—subordinate predications—predications in lower stages of unfoldment. Look at this sentence: *A bitten child often fears a stuffed dog.* The following predications are implicit here: *The child is any child. He is bitten. He fears a dog. The fearing often takes place. The dog is any dog. It is stuffed.* There is only one full-blown predication in the original sentence; the others are in the bud. In the simple sentence, *Lifting the latch of the door he walked into the house*, the phrase, *lifting the latch of the door* is a predication neither in the bud, nor yet quite full-blown, but just half-blown; for the whole sentence is almost equivalent to *He lifted the latch of the door and walked into the house.*

The metaphor in the preceding paragraph must not be pressed too far; it must not be taken to imply that because a predication is in the bud it has never been in full flower. It probably has over and over again, in internal speech if not in overt utterance. So that, rather than a promise of future predications, it is a deposit left behind by past predications. If a speaker uses the expression *A watched kettle never boils*, he employs the term *a watched kettle* as an implied predication, not as an overt predication. It is a predication which is taken for granted by the speaker and is supposed to be taken for granted by the listener. It need not be explicated, or fully unfolded, by either, for it is not the special point of interest to which the speaker

invites the listener's attention. It is there simply to make the point of interest complete and clear. And that point of interest appears in the explicit predicate, which emphasises the fact that the boiling of a kettle seems when you watch it a long and tedious business.

If then we are pressed to say why out of the many eductions, or many implicit predications, one is singled out for display in full regalia of subject and predicate, we are forced to fall back on the will or purpose of the speaker. We are forced to admit that it is because the speaker wishes the listener to regard that particular eduction as of special interest and importance, and to let all the other eductions sink into subservience. It is his device for securing perspective among the eductions. And the favoured eduction takes the form of subject and predicate simply because human experience has shown this to be the most effective way of communicating a thought. The listener's attention is drawn to a certain area of his experience. In other words, he is invited to look at one of his notions, or concepts. That is the subject. Then he is invited either to explore, or to modify, or to extend that notion. That is the predicate.

We have yet to discover the outward sign of predication—the means by which the speaker proclaims his preference. It is obviously to be found in the finite verb. For in every passage of prose or poetry there are just as many explicit predications as there are finite verbs. No verb no predication. But the verb, even in the most analytic of languages, is a word of composite meaning. It is the word of the sentence that "tells"; but what it tells is not one thing but many.

In the sentence *Leander swam the Hellespont* the verb *swam* indicates an act, or, strictly speaking, a series of acts; it indicates roughly the time when the act was performed; it indicates the attitude of the speaker towards the statement (he relates it as a fact); and, in some way or other, it indicates that a predication is being made. It is scandalously over-worked; it does four jobs while each of the other words does but one. It is only as a word, therefore, that a verb is single; as a thought it is multiple. And in order to bring the verb into close relationship with the thought which it expresses—in order to make it mirror that thought more faithfully—it is necessary to split it up into as many parts as it has distinct functions.

This is precisely what the logician tries to do. Though he does not make a complete analysis he at least isolates the sign of predication from the general mass of meaning. And he insists on its being the sign, the whole sign, and nothing but the sign. To reduce the statement to the form *Leander was a swimmer of the Hellespont* is merely to go half-way. For even the word *was* has at least two functions—it implies not only predication but time as well. But the time element, as it has nothing whatever to do with predication as predication, has to be extracted from the finite verb *was*, and packed away in another part of the predicate. So that the sentence has to take some such grotesque form as this: *Leander is one having-swum-the-Hellespont*; or, if a subsidiary predication is permissible, *Leander is a person who has swum the Hellespont*. *Is* now stands as a pure sign of predication. And it is given the name of copula. So a predication, logically expressed, takes

the form of *S is P*, when *S* is the subject, *is* the copula, and *P* the predicate.

The logician, who regards a predication as a two-sided thing (as of course it is if the thing meant is left out of account), calls it a proposition when he means the verbal side, and a judgment when he means the mental side. And he refuses to deal with it at all until he has pressed it into his standard mould. And he cannot press it into this mould without laying violent hands on the verb, robbing it of the bulk of its meaning, and bestowing the spoils on his own reconstructed predicate. So such a predication as *None but the brave deserve the fair* would have to appear in the guise of *No not-brave persons are persons deserving of the fair*, or even of *No existing things are not-brave men deserving of the fair*.<sup>1</sup>

Having remodelled the sentence, the logician goes on to say that this new predicate of his is always attributive. It ascribes attributes to the substance which is represented by the subject. In his own technical language, the subject has to be read in denotation and the predicate in connotation. All of which is no doubt true of the proposition—when he has finished with it—when he has squeezed it into the shape that suits his purpose. It is quite true that the remodelled predication may be regarded as expressing one particular type of relation—the relation of substance and attribute.

When the statement *Mount Vesuvius lies to the east of Naples* takes the form *Mount Vesuvius is east of Naples*, the predicate *east of Naples* may be regarded as a quality

<sup>1</sup> This example is taken from Lewis Carroll's *Symbolic Logic*, pp. 16 and 21.

ascribed to *Naples*, and the spatial relation between the two places kept out of sight. And in the sentence *The gardener planted a bed of parsnips under the kitchen window* (or, to give it its logical form, *The gardener is one having planted a bed of parsnips under the kitchen window*), it is undoubtedly asserted that the gardener possesses the essential attributes of all men who have planted a bed of parsnips under the kitchen window.

We begin to suspect that the logician asks us to accept the simplicity of the proposition when the simplicity is of his own making. Having stowed away in the predicate a number of relations, he asks us to take them all in a bunch and regard them as attributes. And as he claims that judgment is the essential type and model of all thought he would have us conclude that thinking simply consists in noting that certain things have certain qualities. From the manifold of relations with which thought is constantly concerned he picks out one type—the relation of substance and attribute—and makes it swallow up all the rest.

Still, logic as a discipline renders us a three-fold service in suggesting the general form of predication as dictated by the demands of thought; in pointing out the function of the copula; and in stressing the composite nature of the verb. The verb is the grammarian's idol. It is to him the light and life of the sentence. It ushers in the predicate, which is the only interesting and informative part of the sentence. Indeed it *is* the predicate. All the rest is mere appendage. If the rest includes an object, it is an object of the verb; if the rest includes other things besides the object, they are complements of the predicate (that is of the verb) or

extensions of the predicate (that is again of the verb). The predicate itself—the predicate par excellence—is the verb. And the more meaning the grammarian finds crowded into the verb the happier he is. *Vicissem*, for instance, is a glorious word. He parses it with as much gusto as that with which a zoologist dissects a frog. For the word is a compendium of information. It holds within itself both subject and predicate. It states what was done, who did it, when it was done, and how the man who uttered it regarded the event. And it implies that a communication is intended from one person to another. Even when, as in modern English, the verb rarely hints at the specific subject, it is at least the very soul of the predicate.

All this is to the logician rank heresy. To him the verb is an adjective in disguise. It is an adjective which implies changing attributes rather than one static attribute; and it contains (generally in concealment) the mark of predication. In each of the four sentences—

The King is happy  
The King is a philosopher.  
The King is eating his dinner.  
The King is given a grand ovation.

it is the words that follow the verb *is* that constitute the predicate. And all the predicates do the same thing: they describe the King. That *is eating* is commonly regarded as the present continuous tense of the verb *to eat*, and *is given* as the passive voice of the verb *to give*, is not relevant to the issue. Popular usage has already analysed the verb in each of the two sentences into

copula and participle—the participle being, of course, an adjective—and has rendered it unnecessary for the logician to analyse it any further.

Jespersen strongly holds the view that the connection between a noun and its adjective is essentially different from the connection between a noun and its verb. The former he calls *junction*, the latter *nexus*.<sup>1</sup> He seems to use the word *nexus* in much the same way as I have used *predication*. There is a nexus—a dependent nexus—when the predication is not expressly made but is only implied. For instance, in the sentence *I found the cage empty*, Jespersen regards *the cage empty* as the object of the sentence, and that object as itself a nexus, for it implies the predication: *the cage was empty*.<sup>2</sup>

We now come to deal with a few of the vagaries of predication. We have found its normal pattern. We have found the form taken by the thought, and we have found the form taken by the set of words. And we expect the two forms to match. We expect the grammatical predicate to be the same as the logical and psychological predicates. But we are sometimes disappointed. As Professor Stout has shown,<sup>3</sup> the subject-predicate relation only exists because of the narrowness of consciousness. So narrow is it that question and answer cannot come through together. And any predicate may be regarded as an answer to an actual or a possible question. If we take such a sentence as *I am hungry*, neither a grammarian nor a logician would have any difficulty in pointing out the predicate,

<sup>1</sup> *Essentials of English Grammar*, Chap. IX.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup> *Analytic Psychology*, vol. ii, p. 214.

though one would say that it was *am hungry* and the other that it was simply *hungry*. Stout, however, who represents the psychologists, maintains that the predicate cannot be found till it is known to what question the sentence *I am hungry* is a reply. For if the question is *Who is hungry?* then the predicate is *I*; if the question is *Is there anything amiss with you?* the predicate is *hungry*; and if the question is *Are you really hungry?* the predicate is *am*.

In fact the outward form of predication does not always chime with the inner meaning. For the outward form has become a racial habit, and tends to take matters into its own hands. The servant tends to dominate the master. The general custom is for the subject to precede the predicate. That is why a kind of emphasis is secured if the order is reversed. And that is why the film caption *Comes the dawn* gives to the romantic a thrill, and to the sober-minded a pain. When there is no specific subject in the speaker's mind, and the predicate emerges by itself out of the void, habit forces him to find a subject and he takes the vaguest he can find, namely *it*. When the rain is falling, and it is not the falling that interests him but the rain, he says *It rains* or *It is raining*. *It* is here a dummy subject. Stout maintains that in a case like this *It* stands for the universe of discourse. And since the universe of discourse merely means what one is talking about, the sentence is equivalent to saying *What I am talking about rains*; which is not a very luminous remark. There is another word that deputises for the subject, as is seen in the sentence *There was an old woman who lived in a shoe*, which accords more with

our habits of speech than *An old woman, who lived in a shoe, was*.

The main interest of a sentence is centred in the predicate. The subject is merely the jumping-off ground; it is the predicate that is the jumping-off itself. It follows that the predicate, which has to explain, and expound, and inform, is as a rule heavier and longer than the subject. When, therefore, a subject elaborates a topic unduly—which it is able to do by means of implicit predications—one feels that it is usurping the duties of the predicate, and should be shifted to the position usually occupied by the predicate; that is, the end of the sentence. Hence the sentence *To teach a weather-cock to crow is impossible*, while grammatically correct, is more in accordance with custom when put in the form, *It is impossible to teach a weather-cock to crow*.

The subject of a sentence is supposed to represent the universe of discourse; it is supposed to state what the speaker is going to speak about. How is the supposition realised in the following sentence: *I saw in the city yesterday a big fire blazing away with flames thirty feet high?* What am I talking about here? Grammar says it is myself; common sense says it is a fire in the city. What arrests my attention is not the explicit predication *I saw*, but the predications lying latent in the phrase *a big fire blazing away*. The predications are here topsy-turvy. What is grammatically important is logically unimportant; for the *I saw* is lugged in as a mere excuse for making an extraordinary statement, and is intended to be kept in the background.

We have up to the present been dealing with three linguistic units—the word, the predication, and the

sentence. Each owes its unity, not to the letters or words of which it is composed, but to the meaning or purport which lies behind it. And if the nature of these units is to be clearly specified, I suggest that the word be considered the unit of apprehension, the predication the unit of thought, and the sentence the unit of purpose.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GRAMMARIAN'S PITFALLS

Tout obéit au succès, même la grammaire.—VICTOR HUGO.

They have been at a great feast of languages and stolen the scraps.—*Love's Labour's Lost*.

IN the first chapter I took pains to distinguish between the three factors that are involved in every act of speech: thoughts, words, and things. For obvious as the distinction is, we are all at times liable to forget it, and to speak of one of these categories, when we are really thinking of one of the other two. Primitive races, and indeed all people of primitive minds, are peculiarly liable to this confusion. Between the name of the thing and the thing itself there is often believed to be a subtle and unbreakable connection. The name is believed to belong to the thing as truly as does its shape or its size; and the heavenly body that rules the day possesses the name *sun* (or whatever it may be in the native tongue) by the same intrinsic and inalienable right as it possesses the properties of light and heat. Its name is *sun* because it could not be anything else. Man did not invent the name; he discovered it. A British Jack Tar once remarked on the perversity of the French in calling a cabbage a *chou* when they know very well it is a cabbage. And a famous cricketer when asked why a yorker is so called, said in surprise, "What else could you call it?"

This is really a belief in word-magic, a belief on which Ogden and Richards in their book, *The Meaning*

*of Meaning*, make a determined attack. They represent the relation between word, thought, and thing by a triangle, in which the thought stands at the apex and the word and the thing at the other two corners. The peculiarity of the triangle—if it is not an abuse of language to call it a triangle—is that the base is missing and the figure resembles an inverted V. In other words, there is no connection between the word and the thing except through the human mind. The bond, being man-made, is arbitrary and conventional, and is not rooted in the essential nature of things. In this tenet there is of course nothing new, nor anything which one would be likely to contest. What is new is the evidence given in the book of the multitude of misunderstandings that arise, not merely from the delusion that the base of the triangle is closed instead of open, but from the mere fact that meanings are made and re-made by individual minds, and have their share in the chances and changes to which those minds are liable.

The young child has the same difficulty as the savage in separating the word from the thing. The word carries his mind direct to the thing itself, and word and thing merge into one entity. Speech is to him a medium through which he views the objective world; and when it properly serves its purpose it becomes a transparent medium—one that fails to arrest his vision. To him there is something unnatural in thinking of an expression when it is only the reality to which the expression points that is of any practical interest or value. Hence, if you ask a little girl why it is wrong to say, "I ain't good looking," she will probably in her charming way reply, "Because you are good looking." Instances

of the confusion of word with thing crop up in our schools every day. A boy who was asked to give the singular of *quadrupeds* replied, "It has no singular because you can't have a horse with one leg." Another child who was asked what was the gender of *egg*, replied that nobody could tell the gender of an egg until it was hatched. Sir John Adams tells us of an American boy who, when invited to give an example of a collective noun, gave *vacuum cleaner*.

Grammar is in fact a difficult study—difficult enough for the adult, doubly difficult for the child. For the proper study of the grammarian is words; not words as mere sounds or sights, but words as vehicles of sense. Hence, although the centre of gravity of his thinking is in the realm of words, his mind has constantly to oscillate towards thoughts on the one hand and things on the other. Grammar, in other words, is an austere philosophic discipline; it moves in worlds where few minds feel at home. It is therefore no very severe censure of the grammarian to say that even he is sometimes guilty of confusing the categories and speaking of one order of existence while thinking of another. This weakness mainly comes out when he tries to define his terms. And here, in the realm of definitions, it is necessary to speak by the card. No looseness is allowable; no figure of speech, no rhetorical licence, no departure from the strict literal truth.

Let us begin with the conjunction. With one exception<sup>1</sup> every grammarian that I have come across, the

<sup>1</sup> The exception is Mr. A. Darby, who, in his book, *The Mechanism of the Sentences*, defines conjunctions as "words used to link together successive judgments."

best as well as the worst, defines a conjunction as a word that joins sentences. He may add that it joins clauses, phrases, and words as well, but he never forgets to say that it joins sentences. And as he has earlier in his book informed us that a sentence is a set of words, it is fair to conclude that his universe of discourse is the universe of words. He declares that a conjunction joins words, either taken singly or taken in groups. But how can words be joined? If they are spoken in sequence, as in ordinary speech, then they are joined in the mere act of utterance. If, on the other hand, they are written or printed, they are separated by gaps which the insertion of a conjunction can never fill but only make more numerous. If, again, a conjunction is to be regarded as a sort of glue, it can only be effective if it is put in the right place. And the right place is the joint. In the sentence *If you say nothing nobody will repeat it*, the joiner *if* is not at the junction of the two clauses but at the beginning of one of them. The glue is in the wrong place.

It is clear, therefore, that if there is any joining at all it must take place not on the verbal plane, but on one of the other two planes. On which of them is it? When Sydney Smith remarked, *Many a man is willing to act the good Samaritan without the oil and the twopence* he did not intend the word *and* to join two real objects; he merely wished us to think of them together. And we, in assimilating the sentence, though looking towards the outer or objective world, are dwelling in the mental world. And in the maxim cited above, *If you say nothing nobody will repeat it*, whatever joining there is takes place not between two actual events, but

between two contingencies as conceived by the speaker and the hearer. We conclude that if a conjunction joins at all it joins meanings. But does it join even meanings? Does it join them in any way that is peculiar to the conjunction, and is not effected by any other part of speech?

There is a sense in which every word in the sentence is a joining word. The unity of the sentence depends on each word making its own contribution. If the words can be regarded as the bricks of which a sentence is built, then they are bricks which bring with them their own mortar. A noun standing by itself always seems to be looking for a verb; and a verb by itself is a forlorn spectacle ever holding out its hands for a partner or two. In every simple sentence which consists of nothing but the bare essential structure—a structure whose formula is *X is Y* or *X does Y*—every word is a good mixer; and being a good mixer it is a good joiner. It is its own liaison officer.

But a sentence nearly always contains nouns or pronouns which form no part of the basic framework; they stand out as adjuncts or extensions which require some special means of attachment. And it is the duty of the preposition and the conjunction to supply those means. Consider the sentence *David slew Goliath*. *David* by itself has a raw edge, and so has *Goliath*; and *slew* by itself has two raw edges. Each word implies the presence and co-operation of other words. But the sentence as a whole has no mark of incompleteness. It is self-contained and self-sufficient, and is neatly finished off at all points. It has no connectives, and needs no connectives. But if the sentence is expanded

thus: *David slew Goliath with a sling*, or thus: *David slew Goliath and a few other Philistines*, we note that the word *with* in the first instance, and the word *and* in the second, tell us why and how certain nouns are brought within the circle of the sentence. These two words, one a preposition and the other a conjunction, supply the adhesive without which certain parts of the extended sentences would fail to give a coherent meaning.

We may therefore concede the point that both conjunctions and prepositions serve to join or connect in a way that other parts of speech do not. The difference between these two types of joiners will be discussed presently. For the moment let it suffice to say that the objection to the traditional definition of a conjunction is not that the conjunction does not join, but that it does not join sentences. It joins their meanings. And even in this amended form the definition fails to reach the root of the matter, for it gives no indication of the fact that meanings can be joined in one way only, and that is by the mind seizing the relation between them.

Let us now look at prepositions. A preposition is almost invariably defined as a word used with a noun or pronoun to show its relation to some other word in the sentence. If this definition is literally true (as of course every definition should be), then in the sentence *A robin in a cage sets all Heaven in a rage*, the word *robin* is in the word *cage*, and the word *Heaven* is in the word *rage* (or is it the word *sets* that is in the word *rage*?). And when the three blind mice ran after the farmer's wife, the word *after* informs us that the word *ran* comes after the word *wife*. From which examples it is clear that though prepositions admittedly show relations,

they are not relations between words but between things. It is a real robin that is in a real cage, and when it is there, it is a real (or supposedly real) Heaven that is in a real rage. Words, as words, may of course be related to one another; they may be related as to their structure, or as to their pedigree, or as to their position in the sentence, or in many other ways; but none of these relationships is marked by a preposition.

The same confusion of categories is seen in the grammarian's definition of case, which usually runs like this: Case is that form of the noun or pronoun which shows its relation to some other word in the sentence. That this definition should so closely resemble that of the preposition is no mere accident; it is due to the fact that the two things defined are closely related—as closely related as are candles and electric light. As will be shown in the next chapter, prepositions come into existence as substitutes for certain case endings which were breaking down under the burden of work imposed on them, and had to be dismissed for inefficiency. Prepositions took up the work and did it much better.

In modern usage prepositions are a means of constructing new adjectives and new adverbs. In the sentence *No man of sense goes to bed in his boots*, the phrase *of sense* is manifestly an adjective, and the phrase *in his boots* manifestly an adverb. Each phrase is introduced by a preposition and acts as a two-worded, or a three-worded part of speech. The attributes that can be expressed by single words are not very numerous. They are those which are so common, or so frequent, or so permanent that they demand, if only for the

saving of breath, single and separate words for themselves. It would be cumbersome in the extreme if every time a man had to say that a thing was *right* he had to use some such phrase as *in accordance with the fitness of things*; and it would be an intolerable nuisance if every time he had to say *Come quick* (or as the more punctilious would say, *Come quickly*) he had to deliver himself like this: *Come with the utmost celerity of which you are capable*. So common and so useful are the concepts of which *right* and *quick* are the symbols, that it would have been a miracle if Englishmen had not in the course of ages invented single words by which to express those concepts. But the qualities which the human mind can conceive are beyond all reckoning and out of all whooping. To find single words for all of them might perhaps be possible, but to remember the words afterwards and to use them properly would be more than the human brain could compass. Instead of the twenty words<sup>1</sup> that are said to be added to the English vocabulary every year, the number would swell to 2,000 or even 20,000. Dictionaries would grow to elephantine size and would soon elbow all other books from our shelves. But, fortunately for us, none of these things need happen. The preposition comes to our aid, enlists the service of a noun or pronoun, and enables us to build up adjectives and adverbs to fit the special occasion. And with the same units we can build up other adjectives and other adverbs. When Emil wished to describe to his detectives the villain of the plot he called him *the man in a bowler hat*. There was no stock adjective which would suit his purpose

<sup>1</sup> *The English Language*, by L. Pearsall Smith, p. 123.

(except, perhaps, the atrocious one *bowler-hatted*); so he knocked together a temporary one, *in a bowler hat*. It might have been *in a billycock hat*, or *in a beret*, or *in a sombrero*, or *in an opera cloak*, or *in a suit of plus fours*. Or, varying the preposition instead of the noun, he might have used the adjectival phrase *of majestic appearance*, or *about six feet high*, or *with an awful scowl on his haggard face*.

The same principle applies to adverbs as to adjectives: phrasal adverbs may be made to order when no ready-made adverbs are found to fit. And how easy and gracious these phrasal adverbs often are! In comparison with them single-word inventions are clumsy in the extreme. The adage *In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand* is beautiful as it stands. How does it look when put like this: *Matutinally sow thy seed, and vespertinally withhold not thine hand*?

It will thus be seen that a preposition is distinguishable from a conjunction by the fact that it forms phrases which function as single parts of speech. It also, when its partner is a pronoun, governs that pronoun in the objective case. What that statement implies will be explained in the next chapter

A new pronoun is as rare a phenomenon as a new comet. Yet it dawned upon me the other day that a new pronoun had insidiously crept into the English language. It was heard on everybody's lips, it was used on the platform and in the press, it figured prominently in blue-books and official papers. And yet I could find it in no dictionary—not, that is, as a pronoun—nor could I discover it among the list of pronouns in any grammar, however modern. Still, if the

current definition is correct, the word is beyond all doubt a pronoun. The word is *otherwise*. A committee is appointed by an educational body *to report on the success or otherwise of the new organisation of schools*. What does *otherwise* stand for? Why, *failure* of course. And *failure* is a noun. Therefore *otherwise* is a pronoun. Mr. J. A. Spender, writing in the *New-Chronicle*, says, *I am not for the moment expressing any opinion upon the desirability or otherwise of the proposed changes*. *Otherwise* here means *undesirability*. Sir Esmond Ovey, the British Ambassador at Moscow, wires to Sir John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, *I was not allowed to refer to the liberty or otherwise of any of their colleagues*. Here *otherwise* stands for the noun *imprisonment*, and is consequently a pronoun. Instances of this kind might be multiplied indefinitely. I thought at first with Mr. H. W. Fowler that *otherwise*, so used, was not a pronoun, but a blunder. But when I considered the people who used it so—schoolmasters and school inspectors, and ambassadors, and statesmen, and judges on the bench—I could not accept Mr. Fowler's view. For I would rather wrong the dead—dead languages that is—and wrong myself and you than I would wrong such honourable men. There is no help for it. *Otherwise* is now among the pronouns.

Nobody can try to define personal pronouns without coming a cropper. That is because they cannot be defined. There is no differentia which distinguishes them from other kinds of pronouns. Even the fact that they are declined to show grammatical person—a fact sometimes given as their distinguishing feature—fails to mark them off from the reflexive and emphatic

pronouns. The only thing to do is to say, "The following are called personal pronouns." Then after giving the list one may add, "They are no more personal than other pronouns. The only reason for calling them personal is that it has become the tradition to do so."

It is still customary to say that the first person of the personal pronouns denotes the person speaking, the second person the person spoken to, and the third person the person or thing spoken of.<sup>1</sup> In the lines *I could not love thee, Dear, so much, loved I not Honour more*, the pronoun *I* denotes both the person speaking and the person spoken of. Is it first person, or third, or both?

Relative pronouns are difficult to define. It is true that as a rule they relate to an antecedent, but so do personal pronouns. And the antecedent is not always there, invariably not when the relative takes the compound form *whoever*, *whichever*, or *whatever*. In the sentence *What I have promised, that I will perform*, the antecedent seems to have become a subsequent. Can the first word in a sentence have an antecedent? *Who steals my purse steals trash*. To put a ghostly *he* before *who*, and say it is understood, hardly meets the case. Nor is the fact—the undisputed fact—that relative pronouns join sentences enough to differentiate them from all other pronouns. The interrogative pronoun when used indirectly has just as much connective value as the relative, as may be seen in such a sentence as *I asked him who his father was*.

<sup>1</sup> See *A New English Grammar*, by E. A. Sonnenschein, Part II, pp. 11 and 41.

Rarely do teachers of English nowadays define an adjective as a word that describes or points out a noun. They no longer mistake the name for the named. But the definition which has taken its place in some secondary schools, and which is fathered by so scholarly a grammarian as West,<sup>1</sup> has escaped one pitfall by dropping into another. Here is the definition: *An Adjective is a word which is used with a noun to limit its application.* The objection to it is that it does not cover the field. There are numerous adjectives which add nothing to the connotation of the noun; they are used merely to lay emphasis on some picturesque or important quality already implied in the noun itself. Edgar Poe, when he wrote of *the chill seas around the misty Hebrides*, did not mean that there were other Hebrides that were not misty. Nor did Shelley in using the phrase *like a glow-worm golden* have in mind other glow-worms which he wished to exclude, any more than we bar pewter sovereigns when we talk of *golden sovereigns*. We know that golden sovereigns are the only kind there is. When we read that the ancient mariner held the wedding guest with *his glittering eye*, do we take the adjective *glittering* as restricting the application of the term *his eye*? Does it suggest that the mariner had another eye that didn't glitter? All the most characteristic Homeric adjectives are of this non-limiting sort; as witness *wily Odysseus*, *grey-eyed Athene*, *fleet-footed Achilles*, *many-ridged Olympus*, *bathycolpian Here*, and *the polyphlœsbian ocean*.

I have said enough to show that grammar is beset with difficulties. It is not quite certain whether it is a

<sup>1</sup> *The Revised English Grammar*, by A. S. West, p. 286.

science, or an art, or, as Dr. Jowett said of logic, merely a dodge. Assuming it to be a science, we find it an unsettled question whether it is a normative science, or a descriptive science. Its boundaries, which are vague and ill-defined, trench on psychology, logic, philology, and metaphysics. It holds within its purview three large and distinct realms of human knowledge. It demands of the student an alert mind, a capacity for making subtle distinctions, and a keen critical attitude towards language as a vehicle of communication and an instrument of thought. Even the grammatical expert, after many years' study of the subject, sometimes gets a little unsteady in his gait; probably through mixing his thinks. In examining an instrument he sometimes forgets that it is merely an instrument. And that happens to all of us. The difficulty with the child is to get him to examine the instrument at all. He sees no sense in doing anything with an instrument except use it.

An opponent may plausibly object that I insist too strongly on taking every grammatical term *au pied de la lettre*. Surely, he will plead, a little latitude is allowable, and figures of speech may be permitted to grace the pages of a grammar book as of any other book. To talk about words when we mean things is merely to indulge in metonymy, as when we say that a man is fond of the bottle when we know very well that it is the contents that interest him. True, we know very well; and that makes all the difference. We know very well in one case, but there is grave danger of our not knowing very well in the other. And ignorance of the limitations of words—ignorance of the fact that words

have no meanings inherent in themselves, nor any power, or influence, or vitality beyond what is bestowed on them by living men and women—ignorance of all this has been at the root of many a controversy which has separated and embittered mankind throughout the ages, and has hindered the advance of human knowledge and human culture. Hence the importance of keeping words in their proper places, and giving meanings their full due. Still, it is only from definitions that we need banish figurative language. Although it is not permissible to define a camel as a ship of the desert, there is no harm in our referring to him as such. In the same way we may, apart from definitions, speak about the relation between words when we mean the relation between their meanings—provided we know clearly and distinctly what we mean.

Let us bear in mind also that there are two distinct schools of grammarians, distinct in theory and distinct in practice. Their attitudes to the world of words are fundamentally different. Grammar is regarded by one school as a normative and prescriptive science. It speaks with authority. Deriving from an analysis of ancient tongues long since dead, but supposed to be more perfect than any language spoken to-day, the science tends to preserve a noble tradition which alone can guide aright the usage of the native tongue. It contains certain laws and rules and models which are binding on all those who would use the language correctly. Like the laws of the land, they prescribe what ought to be done and what ought not to be done. To violate them is to incur among the learned some degree, however slight, of social censure or social dis-

pleasure. A few die-hards go even further, and hold that not only is this authoritative grammar the best way to keep in the right path those who have already acquired the language, but it is the best way to teach the language to the young child, and to the stranger to our shores. To be grammarless is to be inarticulate and graceless.

The other school makes no legislative or judiciary claims. It counts no Medes or Persians among its members. It is content to study a language as it is—to observe how it is spoken and written, not only by the learned but by work-a-day people in a work-a-day world. The point of studying the history and pedigree of words is not that the practice of the past should guide the practice of the present, but that it should enlighten the practice of the present. Every nation has its own idiom, which should be treated with respect. The past may explain it, but should not be expected to control it. In fact the only authoritative norm or standard is current usage. What is customary for the members of a given community is right for the members of that community—right for the time being at any rate. The task of the grammarian, therefore, is not to tell people what they ought to do in communicating their thoughts, but to call their attention to what they actually do; and by getting them to reflect on their habits of saying things render it more likely that they will improve those habits and purge them of their grosser inconsistencies. Hence his mission is to record and to promulgate the etiquette of language; for although language has no laws it has an etiquette; and like the etiquette of good society it changes from age to age. A hundred years

ago, for instance, it was considered quite good form to say *you was*; and (if Jane Austen rightly mirrors the customs of her times) it was better form to say *Was not I?* than to say *Was I not?* The claims of the descriptive grammarian, therefore, are more modest than those of his opponent, but his task is not less difficult.

Here there are two distinct systems, one stiff with tradition, the other alive with ideas. Far and away the best exponent of the second system is Professor Otto Jespersen, though I am by no means certain that he would subscribe to all the tenets that I have saddled on his school. The other school has no great leader, though it has had, within recent years, a sturdy champion in the late Professor E. A. Sonnenschein, who was the Chairman of the Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology. Of that school I shall have something to say in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE SHADOW OF ROME

*Vocative singular* : O rat, rejoice. *Vocative plural* : O rats, rejoice.—E. A. SONNENSCHNEIN.

The Americans will have no respect for Rome, since they heard it was not built in a day.—DOUGLAS WOODRUFF.

As for the Latin, Madame, you can really have no idea how muddled it is. The Romans would never have found time to conquer the world if they had been obliged first to learn Latin. Those happy people knew in their cradles the nouns with an accusative in *um*.—HEINRICH HEINE.

IN the days of my youth I learnt English grammar (or tried to learn it) from Dr. William Smith's *School Manual of English Grammar*; and I learnt Latin grammar (or tried to learn it) from Dr. William Smith's *Smaller Latin Grammar*. The books formed a pair. They were to all outward appearance as like as any two lions in Trafalgar Square. They were the same size and the same shape. They had the same black covers and the same red edges, and they arranged the subject-matter in much the same way. This is typical of what has happened ever since the English tongue was deemed worthy of serious study and of a grammar all to itself. The English grammar was a mere echo of the Latin grammar. The first grammar written in English was a Latin grammar. That was Lily's, which was published in 1513 and was later known as the *Eton Latin Grammar*. A hundred years passed before English grammars began to appear, and even then they were

nothing to boast of. One of the earliest was Ben Jonson's, and that was brief, trivial, and elementary<sup>1</sup> He was a good Latinist, and proud of it; and his main purpose was to show that English home-brewed could be poured into Roman bottles. For his model was Scaliger's celebrated Latin grammar, and his own book was written in both Latin and English. And so it has gone on ever since. As far as grammar is concerned English has had to play second fiddle to Latin even to this day.

This is unfortunate. For the two languages are at opposite poles. They might have been pretty close together once, but that was more than a thousand years ago. Since that time English and Latin have in their structure and their idiom drifted so far apart that the points of difference are more significant than the points of resemblance. One of these languages is dead and the other is living; one has a small and fixed vocabulary, the other has a large and ever-growing vocabulary; one has much grammar, the other very little grammar;

<sup>1</sup> Since Latin has four conjugations, Jonson assumed that English has four too. And he found them. He had hard work to do it, but he found them. With declensions he was less successful. For though Latin nouns are grouped in five declensions, he failed to find in English more than two. In the first declension the plurals are formed by the addition of *-s*, and in the second declension by the addition of *-en*. To find enough nouns to make a decent show of the second declension was no easy matter. Jonson managed, however, to find two unmistakable examples: *ox—oxen* and *hose—hosen*. Three others are given which belong to both declensions: *house—houses—housen*, *eye—eyes—eyen*; and *shoo—shooes—shooen*. He further remarks that the plural of *child* should be *children*, but it becomes "*childern* (*sic*) because that sound is more pleasant to the eares."

one is synthetic, the other analytic; one expresses relationships by changes in the ends of words, the other by using separate words; in one the order of words is often a matter of indifference; in the other the order of words affects vitally the meaning of the words themselves and of the whole sentence.

The very names of our parts of speech are Latin legacies; and it is doubtful whether they are as good as the ones we could have invented for ourselves. If all the grammar books that have ever been written, and all the grammatical jargon that has escaped from them into other books, could be annihilated at a stroke, and if at the same time all traces of them were expunged from the memory of mankind; and then some man of genius were to write an English grammar based on the language as it is used to-day, the result would be of extraordinary interest. It is pretty certain that the classification into parts of speech would be the same as before; but the christening would be different. And it is not at all likely that the word-classes would all be placed on the same level.

Take the noun to begin with. In the Roman form *nomen* it means a name. And we define it as a name. But every word is a name. A verb is the name of an action or a state; an adjective is the name of a quality; an adverb is the name of a time, a place, or a manner; a preposition is the name of a relationship, and so is a conjunction; and an interjection is the name of an emotional cry. And yet, in spite of their all being names, we feel that there is a fundamental difference between them. We feel that there is a wide difference between *brightness* as the name of a quality, and *bright*

as the name of a quality; between *destruction* as the name of an act and *destroy* as the name of an act; and between *priority* as the name of a relation and *before* as the name of a relation. Dr. Gardiner in dealing with this matter says<sup>1</sup> that "the so-called parts of speech are distinctions among words not based on the nature of the objects to which they refer, but upon the mode of their presentation. Thus the name of anything presented *as* a thing is a 'noun,' and the name of anything presented *as* an action, or, if Meillet's expression be preferred, *as* a process, is a 'verb.'" But this, it seems to me, fails to solve the problem. For the word *destruction* seems to me to present a thing as an action just as truly as *destroy* does. Yet one is a noun and the other a verb.

Jespersen, in his doctrine of ranks among words and word-groups, puts his finger on the real distinction between the parts of speech. This is what he says:

Take the three words *terribly cold weather*. They are evidently not on the same footing, *weather* being, grammatically, most important, to which the other two are subordinate, and of these again *cold* is more important than *terribly*. *Weather* is determined or defined by *cold*, and *cold* in its turn similarly determined or defined by *terribly*. We have thus three ranks: "weather" is Primary, "cold" Secondary, and "terribly" Tertiary in this combination<sup>2</sup>

This gives us the clue. The difference between the words *brightness* and *bright* lies in the way they are used

<sup>1</sup> *The Theory of Speech and Language*, pp. 9 and 10.

<sup>2</sup> *Essentials of English Grammar*, p. 78. See also Jespersen's article on Grammar in the fourteenth edition of *The Encyclopædia Britannica*.

in articulate speech. *Brightness* is used as a primary and *bright* as a secondary; and it is our familiarity with this usage that makes us feel that one is a noun and the other an adjective. In each of the other pairs mentioned above one member is not only of lower rank than the other, but carries with it an implication of special relationship to its superior.

Looking at our English nouns as they stand to-day, we find two variations from the normal spelling of the words—one to show plurality and the other to show possession. And only one of these is a case variation. But if we examine an English grammar, whether it be as old as Ben Jonson's or as new as Sonnenschein's, we shall find the noun saddled with five cases. Not because English pronouns have five cases (they have only three); nor because the Old English nouns had five cases (which they had and more); but because Latin had six, and if human ingenuity could have found six in modern English they would have been found. But no trace of an ablative being discoverable, five was the utmost number to which the samples would stretch.

This cumbersome make-believe needs a deal of defending. One line of defence is that we are concerned with "the soul of the sentence," not with its outward form—a line taken by a grammarian whose own definition of case runs like this: "A case of a noun or pronoun is a form of the word used in a particular way in the construction of a sentence." If it is the soul that really matters, and we should have regard to the number of cases which it would require to express itself adequately by this means, why stick at

five? Sanskrit has eight cases, and the parent language of the Aryan family had nine. Another line of defence is that the device is propædæutic: the best preparation for the study of case in Latin nouns is the study of case in English nouns. Carrying the argument one step further, we may plead that the best way to examine the legs of an insect, which has six, is to start by examining the legs of a snail, which has none.

The key-note of the Report of the Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology, which was issued in 1911, was the subservience of English to other languages—especially to Latin. The established English names for such oblique cases of the English pronouns as had survived, namely objective, indirect objective, and possessive—names which were so easily understood as to be almost self-explanatory—were to be dismissed from office and their posts given to three almost unintelligible foreigners, accusative, dative, and genitive.

What gives stability to a language is a great and noble literature. That is the reason why Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, dead languages though they may be, are not buried yet; nor is it likely that they ever will be. But let this be noted as an incontrovertible truth: it is a literature that gives a language its greatness, not a language a literature. It was near the beginning of the Christian era that the Latin tongue had reached the zenith of its splendour, not because it then exhibited its most characteristic traits of syntax and inflection, but because it was then that Cicero and Cæsar wrote, and it was then that Horace and Vergil sang. If the merit of the language lay in its many inflections, then

was it a finer language at an earlier age; for there is every reason to believe that by the Augustan period its inflectional system had already gone some distance on the road to decay.

At that time there were two systems at work side by side—the system of case-inflections and the system of prepositional phrases. And they generally did the same piece of work at the same time. Cæsar, in his *Commentaries*, not only wrote *Exercitum equitatumque castris continuit*, where the ablative termination *-is* indicates the place where he retained his forces; but also *Cum Cæsar in hibernis esset*, where two devices are used to indicate place—the preposition *in*, and the ablative termination *-is*. And this double method was his usual method. The same piece of work was done twice over. And as this is a waste of human effort which the common people, the people who in the long run guide the destiny of a language, will not continue to tolerate, in course of time one of the devices was discarded—the one which is the less efficient <sup>1</sup>

Precisely the same changes—the supersession of case-inflections by prepositions—took place in our own language; and not those changes only but many others, all making for ease and simplification. But in English they took place more rapidly and more drastically than in Latin, for the resistant forces were fewer. The great purifying period of the English language was the first 300 years after the Conquest. It was then that it shed its hard grammatical shell and became the supple and beautiful language we now know. And it then ran

<sup>1</sup> The stages by which one system was superseded by another are clearly set forth by Bréal in *Semantics*, pp. 16 ff.

as an underground current, ignored by the learned, and despised of principalities and powers. For the gentry spoke French and the clergy spoke Latin, and it was only the underlings who spoke English. But to those unlettered hinds we owe it that our language became the instrument that Chaucer and Shakespeare used, and is no longer a tongue spoken by a handful of people in a small island, but has spread to every corner of the civilised globe. Listen to what G. M. Trevelyan says about it:

Now when a language is seldom written and is not an object of interest to scholars, it quickly adapts itself in the mouths of plain people to the needs and uses of life. This may be either good or evil, according to circumstances. If the grammar is clumsy and ungraceful, it can be altered much more easily when there are no grammarians to protest. And so it fell out in England. During the three centuries when our native language was a peasants' dialect, it lost its clumsy inflections and elaborate genders, and acquired the grace, suppleness, and adaptability which are among its chief merits.<sup>1</sup>

As a relic of the stage where the two systems worked together we have the doctrine that a preposition "governs" a noun or pronoun. It compels it to take a certain case-form—the accusative, the ablative, or some other oblique case. What is the nature of this compulsion? Mere linguistic habit. It began, no doubt, through a certain case-ending on a certain occasion needing a certain preposition to eke out its meaning. The casual and temporary alliance so formed happened to be repeated, and gradually became a fixed social custom. In Latin, for instance, it became

<sup>1</sup> *History of England*, pp. 131, 132.

customary to use *cum* with the ablative and *per* with the accusative. To use *cum* with the accusative, or *per* with the ablative was a breach of good manners—good speech manners, that is. In that sense, and that sense only, *cum* “governs” the ablative, and *per* the accusative. And in that sense only do English prepositions govern the objective case—when there is one to govern. The reason why I must say *for me* and not *for I* is not that one meaning is clearer than the other, but that one phrase is *à la mode* and the other is not. Or, if you like, one is *comme il faut* and the other is not. We may, perhaps, regard the objective form as a sign of union; but, if so, it is not a necessary sign. For when the partnership is between a preposition and a noun and not a pronoun the sign is absent; and nobody seems to miss it. The mere order of the words is enough, for nobody ever fails to identify the partners.

It follows from what I have already said about the use of prepositions in forming new adjectives and new adverbs, that those who wish to express themselves with great precision, or those who wish to express ideas which are not common currency among the masses, make frequent use of prepositional phrases. Some years ago an American psychologist made a long and searching investigation into the suitability of various school books to the intelligence of children of different ages. His first step was to find some simple and reliable criterion of difficulty—some ready means of discovering which books were easy enough, but not too easy, for children of nine, which for children of ten, and so forth. After testing several different criteria he found the prepositional criterion as good as any. The

simpler language had few prepositions; the more complicated language had many.

When it was felt that a language needed prepositions, where did the new words come from? Were they new words at all, or were they old words put to new uses? They were, in fact, old words—or at least older words—used in a new way, the old words being mainly adverbs. We need not go to the Classics to find examples of words generally used as prepositions still lingering on as adverbs; we have examples in plenty in our own language. That three sentences in this paragraph, and indeed the very sentence I am now writing, should end with such adverbs is nothing to be surprised at. The pedant who warned his boys never to use a preposition to end a sentence with is assumed to have broken his own rule. His maxim is supposed to be a good rule expressed in a bad sentence, whereas in fact it is a bad rule expressed in a good sentence. As for the alleged violation of the rule, where does it come in? If the last word *with* is a preposition, where is its partner? What noun or pronoun does it govern?

In the emergence of the parts of speech from the primitive amorphous sentence two distinct stages are discernible. In the first stage the sentence became vertebrated; in the second it became articulated. In the first stage it ossified into noun, pronoun, verb, and adjective—an event which, in the Indo-European group of languages, took place so long ago that nobody can now trace its successive steps. Not so the second stage, in which the sentence became more firmly hinged and jointed by the use of certain words which functioned as adverbs, prepositions, and conjunctions.

At this stage the process can actually be seen at work; for it took place since the dispersion of tongues. In fact the first event was pre-Babel and the second post-Babel. The evidence is to be seen in the dispersed languages themselves. An examination of the pronouns and the numerals, of the nouns and adjectives with their declensions, of the verbs with their conjugations, will convince the most sceptical that they all derive from a common stock. But no such indication is seen in the parts of speech that belong to the second group. Both in Greek and in Latin there are certain terminations which mark the adverb; but they show no trace of a common origin. "Greek has nothing similar to the Latin adverbs in *tim* or in *e*; nor has Latin anything like the Greek adverbs in *δον*, *δην*, *ις*, *θεν*, *θα*."<sup>1</sup> And what can be found in common between the Greek prepositions such as *ἀνά*, *ἀπό*, *κατά*, *ἐπί*, *μετά*, *περί*, and *σύν*, and the Latin prepositions such as *ad*, *circum*, *con*, *contra*, *de*, *ex*, *inter*, *per*, *sub*, and *trans*?

Jespersen in his scheme of English grammar recognises the close connection between the three post-Babel parts of speech, for he lumps them all under the head of "particles." This is what he says: "The last class, 'particles,' contains adverbs, prepositions, coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. I have elsewhere given my reason for treating these together: the difference between the various functions of one and the same word, e.g. *before* in 'I have been here many times before,' 'many times before my marriage,' and 'many times before I was married,' is not important enough to cause it to be placed in different categories;

<sup>1</sup> *Semantics*, by Michel Bréal, p. 182.

in one employment it is like an intransitive verb (has no object), in the others it is 'transitive' and has in one case a substantive, in another a clause as its object."<sup>1</sup>

A striking instance of the tendency to pass English grammar under the Roman yoke is afforded by Sections XV and XVI of the Report of the Joint Committee on Grammatical Terminology,<sup>2</sup> where it is recommended that *his* should be regarded as an adjective in *This is his book*, and as a pronoun in *The book is his*. It is just like saying that *John's* is an adjective in *This is John's book*, and a noun in *This book is John's*. The sole reason for the recommendation is that the words in Latin and the romance languages corresponding to *my*, *our*, *your*, *her*, *his*, and *their* are adjectives in the sense that they conform to the gender and number of the nouns that follow them, not of the nouns they stand for. For instance, *liber suus* may mean *his book* or *her book* or *their book*; *sagitta sua* may mean *his arrow* or *her arrow* or *their arrow*; and *libri sui* may mean *his books* or *her books* or *their books*. *Suus* is masculine because *liber* is masculine, *sua* is feminine because *sagitta* is feminine, and *sui* is plural because *libri* is plural. The words for which they stand affect neither their number nor their gender. Nothing of this kind obtains in English. Yet so strong was the desire of the Joint Committee to bring English into line with foreign languages that they ignored an essential difference in usage.

It is in the treatment of the verb, however, that the Latin influence is most manifest. Between the Latin

<sup>1</sup> *The System of Grammar*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *On the Terminology of Grammar* (John Murray).

verb and the English verb there are differences far too deep to be ignored. The Latin inflections are numerous, the English inflections are few; the Latin verb often contains the subject in itself, the English verb never; the Latin verb consists of one word, the English verb frequently consists of two or more words. Yet in spite of these differences, the paradigm of the English verb is set forth item by item on the model of the Latin verb.

The Latin verb, as I have already shown, is a sort of Pooh-bah; it holds too many offices. And the tendency of time and usage has been to deprive it of some of the offices and bestow them on auxiliaries. In English this tendency has gone a long way. The Latin verb *amabor*, for instance, needs for its translation into English four separate words, *I shall be loved*. Each of the first three words relieves *amabor* of one of its inflexional meanings, so that the root meaning is left almost bare and unencumbered in the last word.

When is an auxiliary not an auxiliary? This is not a conundrum but a serious grammatical question. Which of the following finite verbs may be regarded as auxiliaries and which as verbs of full meaning: *I shall write*, *I may write*, *I can write*, *I will write*, *I should write*, *I must write*? The rule followed by grammarians seems to be this: Translate the expression into Latin. If it can be done in one word, then the finite verb concerned has taken the place of an inflexion and must be regarded as an auxiliary. If it cannot be done, then there is no auxiliary. Since *I shall write* becomes *scribam*, *shall* is an auxiliary. Since *I can write* becomes *possum scribere*, *can* is not an auxiliary. If *I may write* is to be regarded as a subjunctive, it can be construed

as *scribam* and *may* must be treated as an auxiliary; and so on for all the others. In fact it is not the English that settles the point but the Latin; not modern function nor modern form, but solely the question whether the same idea could have been expressed in one word or in more, in another language spoken by an alien people two thousand years ago.

Dr. Johnson is the last man who could be accused of an anti-Latin bias, yet he accredited the English language with a mood unknown to the Romans. He gave *can love* as the potential mood of the verb *to love*.<sup>1</sup> And in this he was followed by Lindley Murray and the grammarians of the early nineteenth century. But the later grammarians would have none of it. They laughed the potential mood out of court, and the English textbooks knew it no more.

A mood may mean one of two things: it may mean the mode in which the speaker regards the predication he is making, or it may mean the form of the verb by which that mode is indicated. In other words, it is either an attitude of mind or an inflection of a verb. If it means the former, the moods recognised in English are too few; if it means the latter, they are too many. The attitudes of mind that in some way or other are expressed in English are numerous enough; the possible attitudes are more numerous still. Mr. Darby<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The predilection of the grammarian for the verb *to love* is accounted for by the fact that in all languages it is of the normal type. "Strange to say," remarks Israel Zangwill, "*to love*, which in real life is associated with so much that is bizarre and violent, is always 'regular' in grammar."

<sup>2</sup> *The Mechanism of the Sentence*, by A. Darby, p. 127.

gives us thirteen English moods apart from the infinitive, which is no mood at all. Here are a few samples: determinative, *I will write*; compulsive, *He shall write*; permissive, *He may write*; obligative, *He should write*; necessitative, *He must write*. It will be noted that in each of these instances the auxiliary does two things: it marks predication and it expresses the mood. We are told by Sonnenschein that Deutschbein recognises in English sixteen moods, which are expressible in a variety of ways. More wonderful than the classification itself is the Herr Doktor's rich terminology; as witness:<sup>1</sup> intensified voluntative mood, *You must go*; unreal cogitative mood, *He would come (if he were not ill)*; cogitative of necessity, *He must have been mad*.

If mood, in order to be genuine, has to be indicated by a change in the form of the verb, then the English moods are fewer and simpler than the usual grammatical display would suggest. The infinitive, which presents the basic and neutral form of the word, cannot properly be regarded as a mood; nor is the imperative sufficiently removed from the infinitive to be ungrudgingly granted a distinct status. "The frequent addition of *will you* (or *won't you*) goes to show that the imperative is really felt to be merely a separate use of the infinitive."<sup>2</sup> As for the subjunctive, that is fast disappearing from the language. It lingers on mainly in the use of *were* for the indicative *was*, and in formal resolutions, such as, *I propose that a hearty vote of thanks be accorded to Mr. —*.

The truth is that the attitude of the speaker to his

<sup>1</sup> *The Soul of Grammar*, p. 59.

<sup>2</sup> Jespersen, *The Essentials of English Grammar*, p. 293.

own utterance is revealed in a variety of ways, mood being but one of them. In oral speech the tone of voice tells a great deal. It tells, for instance, whether *You're a fine specimen* is to be taken literally or ironically. It tells whether in saying *Zola was a realist*, the speaker is trying to praise Zola or to disparage him. The same sentences appearing in a page of print tell us none of these things; not in themselves, at any rate; they can only do so by the context or by the general trend of the writer's observations

Not only is the speaker able to show his hand by means of such defective verbs as *shall (should)*, *may (might)*, *do (did)*, *can (could)*, *must*, and *ought*, but he has a large range of particles at his disposal. If he remarks of a friend, *Fortunately he married Jane, not Joan*, the adverb does not modify the verb but the whole sentence. The sentence not only asserts that the friend did not marry Joan, and did marry Jane, but discloses, through the adverb, the speaker's opinion that the choice was fortunate. *Perhaps, probably, certainly, indeed, in fact, therefore, hence, so, but, because, since, if*, etc., are adverbs shading off into conjunctions, and their use is to show a complicated variety of relationships. Sometimes it is the relation between events, sometimes it is the relation between the speaker and the relation between the events, and sometimes both these relations are suggested at the same time by the same word. Relations such as these have numerous exponents, and among those exponents mood takes no very prominent place.

Enough has been said to make it clear that although the early attempts to formulate a grammar of the English language owe much to comparison with a

language whose grammar had long before been established, that older language should not now be allowed to impede the natural development of English, nor to make the study of English by English boys and girls more difficult than it need be. English is well able not only to stand on its own feet, but to march to its own music.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE VULGAR TONGUE

The one common basis of a common culture is the common tongue —GEORGE SAMPSON

The history of speech is also the history of human understanding —DR ALAN H. GARDINER

Brains may become so clogged with words that thought becomes awkward and difficult —PROF. H. R. HUSE.

**SPEECH** in a young child begins with babbling. He makes a noise with his vocal organs, as an agreeable change from crying. The noise has no meaning for him, but he delights to make it, because the making of it feeds his sense of power. It enables him to realise himself as a maker. He rejoices in his lingual activity just as, when he throws his toy to the ground over and over again, he rejoices in his manual activity. His babbling, however, is not a mere fortuitous production of sounds. It is an imitative vocal gesture. It contains sounds that he has heard made by the human beings about him. Hence the babble of a French baby, random and inarticulate as it is, is easily distinguishable from the babble of an English baby.

It follows from this that a baby must have listened before he babbled; which is obvious too from the fact that he always understands more than he can himself say. Understanding comes slowly; but not so slowly as speech. Long before my own daughter was a year old, and before she could utter a single word, she

would readily respond to our attempts to amuse her with sounds and jingles. If we said *Pat-a-cake, Pat-a-cake, baker man*, she would clap her hands; and if we said, *This little pig went to market*, she would fiddle with her toes.

Those patient investigators who have recorded week by week, and even day by day, the signs of development in a baby, never fail to make note of the first articulate word—the first word used with deliberate meaning. It generally turns out to be a noun, and in more than 50 per cent. of the cases it is either *da-da* or *ma-ma*. The average age at which the great event takes place is eleven months. And the parent with a turn for psychological observation keeps a vigilant lookout for the event, and is immensely proud if he finds his own offspring coming up to scratch. *Crede experto*.<sup>1</sup> My own little girl was ten and a half months old when she unmistakably spoke her first word. But it was not a noun; it was an adjective. The word was *pretty*, but she pronounced it *pwitty*. Pointing to an object that pleased her, she would say *pwitty*. Soon she was saying it fifty times a day. Not that it carried any æsthetic meaning, for she would say it when pointing to her daddy. What it seemed to imply was, *Here's an interesting thing; have a look at it*.

We have already shown the broad lines upon which speech seems to have developed in the human race. First the one-word sentence, then the three parts of speech that form the skeleton of the sentence, finally the three particles that give the sentence close articula-

<sup>1</sup> This must not be mistranslated *Believe an expert*. The proper translation is, *Take the word of a man who has been through it*.

tion. Something very similar occurs with young children. They begin with the one-word sentence. Then the sentence begins to differentiate into distinct parts of speech. Between the ages of one and two, nouns vastly predominate in a child's vocabulary; they are more numerous than all the other parts of speech put together. Verbs come next, and grow in relative importance as the child gets older. The first two-word sentences have rarely a grammatical structure; they consist of any two parts of speech loosely put side by side. But there are exceptions. My daughter's first effort was *No touch*. It was uttered with explosive emphasis to the maid who offered to help her as she crawled up a staircase.

It is a curious fact that though a child begins to speak when he is one year old, no pronoun appears in his vocabulary till he is two. Then, if we are to trust a few careful observations that have been made,<sup>1</sup> they appear in the following order: *I, you, me, myself, him* or *her, my, your, he* or *she*, etc. The interesting thing about this sequence is not only that he himself comes first—that we should expect—but that when the pronoun refers to himself the nominative comes before the accusative, but when it refers to others the order is reversed. He thinks of himself as the chief actor in the human drama, while others remain comparatively passive. Further observations show<sup>2</sup> that although in the number of different words nouns predominate in his vocabulary, and pronouns inevitably form but a small proportion of the total stock, yet in frequency of usage

<sup>1</sup> *The Symbolic Process*, by John F. Markey, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p. 85.

pronouns come before nouns, and verbs come first of all; which confirms the well-known fact that the young child is both active and ego-centric.

Professor Piaget of Geneva, in his recent researches, finds abundant evidence of the fact that the young child's universe revolves round himself. His thinking is ego-centric, and his talking is ego-centric. The two go together. He is naturally a garrulous creature, and when in sound health and good spirits he emits an interminable stream of talk. He chatters about what he is doing, he chatters about what he is observing, he chatters about what he is thinking. And he doesn't seem to mind very much if nobody listens to him. He still goes on talking, addressing his remarks to the universe at large. He does it for the mere fun of the thing—the mere joy of expressing himself. It makes his thinking more lucid, his experience more vivid. We can plainly see that if it benefits nobody else, it at least benefits himself. And this self-centred loquacity goes on for two or three years. Indeed, we are assured by Piaget that it is not till he is seven or eight years of age that the child can take the other person's point of view. He has, of course, been aware—acutely aware—of the existence of other people, but not as other selves, not as other human beings with precisely the same right as himself to a place in the sun, and precisely the same claim to be appreciated and understood.

This ego-centric tendency in talk, which Professor Piaget regards as characteristic of the young, is not unknown among people of maturer years. It is not impossible to find a group of young women all talking

at once, and nobody listening. The significance, however, of the change indicated by Piaget is that it marks the period from which the influence of the sayee upon the sayer makes itself increasingly felt. And who can set a limit to that influence? Who can gauge the extent of the influence on that struggle towards lucidity and persuasiveness which marks every stage in the progress towards the mastery of a language? <sup>1</sup>

The size of a child's vocabulary, as indeed that of an adolescent and of an adult, is now pretty accurately known. It was not so half a century ago. It was not so when Max Muller in a reckless moment fixed the vocabulary of a farm labourer at 300 words. That indeed, we are assured by Stern,<sup>2</sup> is the actual number used by a girl of two or a boy of two and a half. Professor Terman, whose findings are based on sound observational data, gives 3,600 words as the vocabulary of an average child of eight, and 9,000 words as that of the average child of fourteen. An average adult has a knowledge of 11,700 words, and a "superior adult" of 13,500.<sup>3</sup>

What is surprising about these figures is not only the size of a child's vocabulary, but the rate at which that vocabulary grows. Between the ages of eight and fourteen he increases his store of understood words at the rate of 900 words per annum. That is to say, the ordinary child learns the meanings of two or three new words every day. And they are not necessarily little

<sup>1</sup> For a clear and critical account of Piaget's views see *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, by Dr. Susan Isaacs, p. 73 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *The Psychology of Childhood*, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup> *The Measurement of Intelligence*, p. 226.

words. Our forefathers thought they were. They thought that words of one syllable were more readily assimilated by children than words of two syllables. So they fed the very young on monosyllables. After mastering the book with words of one syllable, the child proceeded to the next book, which had words of two. Indeed, the current school books for beginners are based on much the same principle. The child of six reads a great deal about the ox, about which he cares little; and nothing about the elephant, about which he cares a great deal. And he meets in book-land a strange animal called a *nag*, which he never knows in real life—not under that name anyhow. There is some justification, of course, for this when a child is learning to spell, or even when he is learning the mere mechanical art of reading. But in the matter of acquiring the English tongue there is no justification for it at all. Very little children in a nursery school will tell you what an aeroplane is, but they cannot tell you what an axe is.

It is true that the healthy and unrepressed child is loquacious; but how loquacious? How many words does he utter during the day? Professor Markey gives us a provisional answer to that question, by stating the average of ten cases in which the words had actually been recorded and counted.<sup>1</sup> The average age is 3·4 years, the average number of words spoken is 11,518, and the average number of words per minute is 15·6. This gives no clue to the size of the vocabulary used, for many of the words were used over and over again. Nor are we safe in assuming that the figures

<sup>1</sup> *The Symbolic Process*, p. 82.

represent the average of the total population, for the subjects observed seem to have been in nearly every case the children of the investigators themselves—a notoriously precocious class of young people.

Here's an interesting question: How many words pass through a man's head during the day? How many words does he speak, hear, read, and think of during the fifteen hours when he is presumed to be awake? Mr. Gustav Spiller raises this question,<sup>1</sup> and gives 50,000 as the probable answer. In conversation, a man speaks or hears about 160 words a minute; and in reading he takes in words at a still faster rate; but in the soliloquy which fills in the gaps, the rate of verbalisation is much more difficult to estimate, for it varies not only from person to person, but in the same person from hour to hour, and even from minute to minute. It is obvious, however, that in reverie the mere verbal rate, as distinct from the rate of thought, is lower than in the other two pursuits. Taking the activities all round, and allowing for slack intervals, Mr. Spiller thought that 60 words a minute was a reasonable average to take in arriving at his final estimate of 50,000 words. It must be remembered, of course, that they are 50,000 different utterances, not 50,000 different words. In fact the commoner words, such as *the, and, of, but, is, has*, etc., must be used over and over again, perhaps fifty or a hundred times a day. These figures bring home to us the amazing amount of practice a person gets in acquiring and maintaining the mother tongue. Its staple words and forms and phrases are beaten into the brain by countless repetitions.

<sup>1</sup> *The Mind of Man*, p. 413.

It is easier for the right hand to forget its cunning than for the tongue to forget the habits it has formed in early childhood and has been deepening and hardening ever since.

Children at school are nowadays put to write pieces of composition at an early age—as early as seven or eight—and continue to write stories and letters and essays throughout their school career. It is possible therefore to trace their progress in composition as they pass up the school. At eight years of age their writings fall broadly into two groups, the unsophisticated and the sophisticated. The unsophisticated much resemble the artless talk of the garrulous. Here are two samples:

(1) *How to wash up* I would take a few at a time and put them in a bowl and if the bowl wouldn't hold them I would take them out and then I would wash them up.

(2) *My cat* I had a little kitten and I let him go for a walk in the street and he saw a sparrow and he caught it and ate it, so his mummy took him to the cats home.

The sophisticated sort show evidence of training in the writing of isolated sentences, as will be seen from these two examples:

(1) *My Home* My home is in London. It is very comfortable. In it are five rooms. It is very old. It stands at the bottom of the street. It has not been mended very long ago. The colour of it is dark red. It is very shabby. The biggest room in it is the kitchen. We are not staying very long in it. The front garden is very little. I like it very much.

(2) *Myself* My hair is orben. I have got brown eyes. My cheeks are red. And I have got a blue frock. With a white collar round it. And I have got pink socks with move bands round them. And black shoes on. My shoes have gray soles. I have not got any dimpills on my face. And I have got thin legs.

It must not be thought that children of eight spell anything like as well as three out of the four specimens would suggest; for in many schools not only are the words likely to be required in the composition exercise put upon the blackboard, but the children are allowed to ask their teacher how to spell any word they wish to use.

The second type exemplified above is due to an attempt to teach punctuation from the very beginning. It is a laudable attempt. For, generally speaking, far and away the most frequent error in the writings of young children is the omission of the full stop at the end of the sentence. In one of the two examples given above the attempt has succeeded, in the other it has failed.

In the main essentials of writing there is not much to choose between the two extreme types, the unsophisticated and the sophisticated. Both consist almost entirely of simple predications, the only difference being that they are in one case joined together by a liberal use of such connectives as *and*, *so*, and *then*, and in the other case separated by full stops. The main bulk of composition exercises at this age fall between these two extremes.

Let us look at some of the characteristics of these early writings. As might be expected, the predications are shorter than those of an adult. The average length of a child's predication is about six words at eight years of age, and about seven at fourteen. For purposes of comparison it may be mentioned that the average in a *Times* leader is ten, in Johnson nine, and in Macaulay eight. (These figures, being drawn from only a

dozen pages or so in each case, must not be accepted as a final estimate.)

If we punctuate a child's composition, we find that half his sentences are simple. The same, however, is nearly true of Macaulay; for about 45 per cent. of his sentences are simple too. So are 20 per cent. of the sentences in the leaders of *The Times*. At the opposite pole come the early writings of Johnson and of Ruskin, where simple sentences are so rare as to constitute less than 2 per cent. of the whole.

Children subordinate their clauses far less frequently than adults; they affect the compound rather than the complex sentence. In fact, only about 15 per cent. of their clauses are subordinate as compared with 33 per cent. in Augustine Birrell's writings, 40 per cent. in Macaulay's, 50 per cent. in Robert Lynd's, and 60 per cent. in Henry James's. Children's favourite introductory words are *when*, *because*, *if*, and *that*.

Participles are seldom used by young children. Sentences containing them are so rare that I made a note of this one: "Trembeling with fright the rabbits said, we are very sorry sir, but we are only playing."

Only gradually do children become familiar with the use of relative pronouns. At the age of eleven not more than 5 per cent. of their connectives are relative pronouns, the average percentage for an adult being about 20.

There is one characteristic of a child's writings which cannot escape notice, and that is the frequency of the word *and*. He seems to sprinkle it all over the page. If we count his connectives (by which I mean conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs, and relative pronouns)

we find that half of them consist of *and*. He uses it as frequently as all the others put together. We notice that; but what we do not notice is that we ourselves do the same. We too use *and* with extraordinary frequency. And so do our best writers. Stevenson, in *Across the Plains*, uses *and* just as frequently as a child. Macaulay, who does much of his linking by means of relatives, makes shift with a 30 per cent. use of *and*; but Emerson, who is also sparing in his use of simple joinings, needs 40 per cent. In fact, the word *and* is used freely and abundantly by every writer great or small, ancient or modern. It forms nearly a half of the connective tissue of English prose.

*And*, therefore, is a word of overwhelming importance. And the fault with children is, not that they use it too frequently, but that they use it unskilfully—a fault which cannot be remedied by merely telling them never to begin a sentence with *and*. Such a prohibition seems to me to savour of insincerity. When we give a child a copy of Kingsley's *Heroes*, do we at the same time tell him that Kingsley's English is bad, because out of the first hundred sentences twenty-four begin with *and*?

The real difficulty about *and* is its punctuation; and this is difficult because it is based not upon logic but on psychology. And partly, it must be admitted, upon fashion and caprice. Israel Zangwill, for instance, writing in the nineteenth century, said:

Everybody gives his opinion freely, and it is worth the price.

Arnold Bennett (to take the first example that occurs to me), writing in the twentieth century, would have

felt that Zangwill had not got the full force out of the second clause, and would have put it like this:

Everybody gives his opinion freely ; and it is worth the price.

Or even like this:

Everybody gives his opinion freely. And it is worth the price.

It may be stated generally that the heavier the stopping before the *and*, the greater is the emphasis that is thrown on the phrase that follows. It is a device borrowed from the stage. If an actor wishes to emphasise a word he pauses before and after. He surrounds it with silence.

So far we have been considering the child with one mother tongue. How fares the child who has two—the child who is bilingual from the first ? Not so well, I regret to say. An investigation carried out in Wales a few years ago caused much perturbation because it seemed to indicate that to learn two languages concurrently in early childhood retards mental development. For the investigators showed that the monoglot child—whether he spoke English only or Welsh only—reached a given stage of development sooner than the bilingual child of the same age. This should have caused no surprise; except of course in the minds of those who believe that language is a creator of thought, and who fail to realise that too many words in proportion to the ideas may cumber the ground. A household may be badly run because the maids are too few, or because they are too many.

That Latin is a finer means of mental training than the vulgar tongue is a belief that was at one time held

by everybody, and is even to-day held by no small number of people. And it is a curious fact that the two main reasons which they adduce are diametrically opposed. For one is that the two languages are alike, and the other is that they are different. The first argument assumes that the fundamental structure of all languages is the same, and that this structure can be more clearly seen and more profitably studied in Latin than in English. The second argument maintains that the structure of Latin is so different from that of English, and its idiom so alien, that in order to translate from one to the other it is necessary to disentangle the thought from the first before it can be embodied in the second. It has to be melted down and cast in a fresh mould. Hence the real aim in the study of Latin is to liberate thought from the shackles of language. And since the study of all other foreign languages is directed to the same end, it follows that the more languages a man knows the more independent of language does his mind become. It is the desperate device of the Oriental who marries a multitude of wives in order to get peace.

It will, I think, be conceded that there is a nucleus of truth in each of these two arguments. So familiar are we with our native tongue that we do not look *at* it; we look *through* it. And for this reason an alien tongue like Latin makes perhaps a better object for inspection. There seems at any rate no great danger of our seeing through it. As for the second argument, it seems to be of the sort that commits suicide. Languages are to be laboriously acquired in order that they may become unnecessary.

Language enthusiasts, in fact, pitch their claims too high. They forget that words bear much the same relation to ideas as money does to wealth. They are like the miser who thinks that by hoarding coins he is hoarding goods, or the politician who thinks that by the inflation of the currency (that is, by the multiplication of money) the prosperity of the country is increased.

Dr. Susan Isaacs makes this shrewd observation: "The children with whom language has been kept subordinate to real things and events actually show a greater mastery of verbal expression than others. An example of this is Dan's spontaneous and excellent description of the ball-and-socket joint at the hip in the human skeleton as a 'twist-hole.'"<sup>1</sup>

The truth is that there is a natural and normal relation between the stock of ideas in a person's head and the stock of words. There is little likelihood of the first being increased faster than the second; but it is fatally possible for the second to be increased faster than the first. Dr. H. R. Huse, himself a professor of languages, remarks that "men who can speak a number of different tongues are notorious for having little to say in any of them."<sup>2</sup> If Dr. Huse intends this statement to be taken as universally true he is palpably wrong. He is himself a flagrant refutation. Indeed some of the ablest and most interesting men we meet are learned in many languages—or at least conversant with many tongues. But they are interesting, not because of their linguistic resources, but because of

<sup>1</sup> *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> *The Illiteracy of the Literate*, p. 31.

their vigorous and adventurous minds—minds which need more grist to grind than the English language can provide. There are, however, others to whom the languages themselves are the grist and their mere acquisition the goal. They are idly garrulous in many tongues. And a fool is no less a fool for being a fool in French as well as in English.

## CHAPTER IX

### LEVELS OF COMPLEXITY

The Reader's mind is the Writer's palette —VERNON LEE.

Bulk talking produces a greater effect than Bones talking —G. J. HOLYOAKE.

He draweth out the thread of his verbosity finer than the staple of his argument.—SHAKESPEARE, *Love's Labour's Lost*.

IN the elaboration of language there are degrees. It may rise from Gertrude Stein to William Shakespeare; from the lallation of infancy to the finest expression in poetry or prose. At the lowest level of all, the mind is the slave of words. Words gallop round like horses at a circus and repeat themselves times without number. I once heard a very small boy, who had just discovered the joy of articulation, reiterate the word *pink* till some of his hearers began to see red. Then he changed over to *apple pie* and harped on that phrase till his mother forcibly put a stop to it. After a short interval he began again, mixing the two this time, and giving us a double fugue instead of a single one. For a whole hour we heard nothing from him but *pink* and *apple pie*, but these we heard in abundance. Now listen to Gertrude Stein:

Not so dots large dressed dots, big sizes, less laced, less laced diamonds, diamonds white, diamonds bright, diamonds in the in the light, diamonds light diamonds door diamonds hanging to be four, two four all before, this bean, lessly, all most, a best, willow, vest, a green guest, guest, go go go go go go, go. Go go Not guessed Go go.

Toasted susie is my ice-cream.

Well, what do you think of it? Is toasted susie, with the dressed dots, and the laced diamonds, and the green guest thrown in, lessly or morely, any better than apple pie?

All these, I presume, are words that bubble up from the unconscious. Thought, if there is any thought, is at a minimum. There is no true reverie, not even that of the old fellow who sat "reflecting and therewith drinking, and then again drinking without reflecting." For in reverie thought holds the reins, loosely perhaps and intermittently, but it holds the reins. The procession that passes through the soliloquising mind is a retinue of ideas, not a scamper of wild words. What words accompany the ideas depends so much on the person thinking, and so much on the subject thought about, that no general rule can be laid down. We verbalise in varying degrees. But rarely, even with the best of us, is the verbalisation complete; rarely is the internal speech so coherent, so well constructed, so free from breaks and blanks, that if spoken aloud it would be quite intelligible to the hearer. Internal speech, in fact, is never in complete chaos, never in complete order, but always somewhere between the two.

As soon, however, as we try to communicate our thoughts to others we find that the lazy language of soliloquy will not suffice. We have to exert ourselves to make ourselves intelligible. To render the inner speech fit for outer speech we have to revise it and amend it and complete it. Not that the exertion required is great. For most of us carry on the conversational business of life by an easy interchange of

formulas; and indeed in the ever-recurrent incidents of the day nothing more is needed. A meeting B in the street puts forward his formula, *Fine day to-day*, and B responds with *Very*. It is a mental handshake—an expression of goodwill which involves no intellectual strain.

Mrs. Hugh Bell, in a book published towards the close of last century under the title of *Conversational Openings*, treats conversation as a pastime, not unlike the game of chess, in which there are certain well-recognised gambits. There is, for instance, the diner-out's bread opening, where Black (Black, of course, is the gentleman) begins with *Is this your bread or mine?* Or with the soup opening: *Do you say drink soup, or eat soup?* The nature of White's rejoinders will depend upon her skill as a player. If she says *I really don't know* it may lead to the abandonment of the game after three moves. It is then open for Black or White to start a new game with a fresh gambit.

It is only the opening moves, however, that are conventional. The rest of the game, unless it is a very bad game indeed, demands some degree of invention and construction. It needs more than memory; it needs brains. Words and phrases have to be joined and adjusted to meet the moves of the opponent. And if there is any seriousness or sincerity in the game—if one of the players wants to say something and the other wants to learn something—there is a distinct effort towards lucid utterance on the one side, and intelligent uptake on the other. But, unless the interlocutions are intolerably pompous, there is very little elaboration of language on either side. The language is nothing

more than internal speech tidied up and made presentable. And if the ideas are fresh and vivid, the expression will be fresh and vivid too. The word *conversation* need not deceive us. Landor's Imaginary Conversations are indeed imaginary. They consist of complicated webs of words such as might perhaps be woven in the solitude of the study, but could not possibly be achieved in the rapid give and take of conversation. They belong, in fact, to a higher level of elaboration. Conversation is home-spun, not brocade. It appears at its best in Boswell's *Life of Johnson*; and here the sentences are short (the average length is well under twenty words), and about 35 per cent. of them are simple. As for the predications, they run on an average to no more than seven words.

At the next higher stage—or if not higher at least more remote from the scrappiness of inner speech—comes the language of the orator. On the platform a man is more careful of his words than at the fireside; he spins sentences, he balances phrases, he aims at a richer and more rhythmic utterance. But if it is to be good oratory, if it is to achieve its proper purpose of convincing or persuading an audience of average intelligence, then the elaboration must not be carried too far. The aim must be to produce, not readable stuff, but hearable stuff. For there is a limit not only to the rate at which an audience can take in ideas with ease, but also to the complexity of the prose it can listen to with comfort. When that limit is passed boredom supervenes. For the listener has not the advantage of the reader in being able to retrace his steps. What he misses he misses for good. The

words he has failed to understand have passed into oblivion and are kept there by the pressure of the new stream that continues to pour from the speaker's lips.

So the texture of the spoken discourse should be looser than that of the printed book. A little padding does no harm. A few well-worn clichés will help to keep the audience in a good humour. Fine sonorous words of the Mesopotamia and Madagascar sort serve another and still more excellent purpose. They thin out the ideas nicely. They keep the sense properly diluted with sound. There is no need to avoid long sentences, provided they are of the simple cumulative kind that pile on idea after idea, all of the same sort and expressed on the same pattern. These, in fact, are very effective. What is to be avoided, and avoided like the plague, is the long involved sentence whose head is forgotten before the tail is reached.

The examples of oratory given in anthologies are sometimes misleading. A prime favourite is William Pitt's speech, alleged to have been delivered in the House of Commons on March 6th, 1741, in reply to an attack by Horace Walpole (uncle of the epistolary Horace), and beginning "Sir, the atrocious crime of being a young man, which the honourable gentleman has with such spirit and decency charged upon me, I shall neither attempt to palliate nor deny, but content myself with wishing that I may be one of those whose follies may cease with their youth, and not of that number who are ignorant in spite of experience." What is the evidence for the authenticity of this speech? Here it is. It was reported in *The Gentleman's Magazine*. But it is a well-known fact that the parliamentary

reports of that particular period were composed by a man who had but once been within the walls of the House of Commons, and had made up the speeches from a few notes supplied him by somebody else. That man was Samuel Johnson.<sup>1</sup> A reported speech did not represent what was actually said, but what might have been said if the speaker had had Johnson's skill in saying it. Verbatim reports they certainly were not. The world had to wait for another seventy years before Isaac Pitman was even born. There is, in fact, every reason to believe that the celebrated speech did not come from the tongue of William Pitt in the House of Commons, but from the pen of Samuel Johnson in a garret in Exeter Street. It bears the marks of the Great Cham's spirit and the Great Cham's style. He and Pitt had much in common. They were both young; there was, in fact, but one year's difference in their ages. They were both Tories. They both disliked the Walpoles. And although Johnson tried to be fair to the two parties, he confessed that he "took care that the Whig dogs should not have the best of it."

Then again, it is customary to give one of Burke's speeches as an example of good oratory—which it is not. Good writing, if you like, but not good oratory. "It is not," says Macaulay,<sup>2</sup> "by accuracy or profundity that men became the masters of great assemblies. And why be at the charge of providing logic of the best quality, when a very inferior article will be equally acceptable? Why go as deep into a question

<sup>1</sup> See Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, edited by G. Birkbeck Hill, Vol. I, pp. 118 and 502-12.

<sup>2</sup> Essay: *Gladstone on Church and State*.

as Burke, only in order to be, like Burke, coughed down, or left speaking to green benches and red boxes." Get somebody to read aloud to you one of Burke's speeches with which you are unfamiliar, and observe how much of it you can take in. Then remember that a speech has to be heard but once.

Even Abraham Lincoln's noble speech at Gettysburg, simple and sincere as it is, was not it seems wholly successful as a speech; not so successful as other speeches which were delivered on the same occasion but have long since passed into the limbo of forgotten things. Yet it has good rhetorical points. The speech is short; the sentences are short; there is a progressive development of a single sentiment. And the last sentence, though uttered seventy years ago, has been ringing in the ears of English-speaking people to this day. But that is because it was perpetuated in print and has stood the test of perusal and reperusal. It has ceased to be mere rhetoric and has become literature.

It has, in fact, reached the next stage of elaboration, which brings discourse within the domain of writing or of print. The eye supplants the ear. The pace of the reader is not determined by the pace of the writer as that of the listener is by that of the speaker. The reader can go his own pace, and can retrace his own steps as far as he likes and as often as he likes. Hence, the writer may complicate his prose to any degree he pleases. But he does so at a cost. The more he labours his writing the more he contracts the circle of his readers. For most readers are impatient creatures. Accustomed to a certain rate of reading—a rate cunningly gauged by the newspaper and the novel—

they are irritated by an obstacle of any kind, especially if it lies, not in the nature of the subject-matter, but in the clumsy way in which it is presented. And it is clumsily presented if the structure is too involved. Look, for instance, at the following sentence, the opening sentence in Ruskin's *Modern Painters* :

If it be true, and it can scarcely be disputed, that nothing has been for centuries consecrated by public admiration, without possessing in a high degree some kind of sterling excellence, it is not because the average intellect and feeling of the majority of the public are competent in any way to distinguish what is really excellent, but because all erroneous opinion is inconsistent, and all ungrounded opinion transitory; so that while the fancies and feelings which deny deserved honour and award what is undue have neither root nor strength sufficient to maintain consistent testimony for a length of time, the opinions formed on right grounds by those few who are in reality competent judges, being necessarily stable, communicate themselves gradually from mind to mind, descending lower as they extend wider, until they leaven the whole lump, and rule by absolute authority, even where the grounds and reasons for them cannot be understood.

It is quite clear that Ruskin took great pains with that sentence. He was only twenty-four when he wrote it; it was the first sentence in his first book; and I have no doubt he looked upon the finished sentence with considerable pride. And with good reason. It is constructed with great skill and is full of sound sense. But what a sentence to lead off with ! It has 153 words and 18 clauses. The dinner begins not with *hors d'œuvre*, or with soup, but with a thick slab of roast beef—and a pretty tough slab too. Be honest, good readers, and say whether you, intelligent as you are, took in the full sense at one reading ? It is not that the sentence is too

long, but that it is too involved. Here is another sentence, more than twice as long, yet quite easy to follow. It comes from near the end (not the beginning, mark) of Stevenson's essay, *Pulvis et Umbra*. The author has just stated that man, when looked at closely, is always seen to have some nobility in his nature, and often "startles us with an admiring wonder." Then he goes on like this:

It matters not where we look, under what climate we observe him, in what stage of society, in what depth of ignorance, burthened with what erroneous morality, by camp-fires in Assiniboia, the snow powdering his shoulders, the wind plucking his blanket, as he sits, passing the ceremonial calumet and uttering his grave opinions like a Roman senator, in ships at sea, a man inured to hardships and vile pleasures, his brightest hope a fiddle in a tavern and a bedizened trull who sells herself to rob him, and he for all that simple, innocent, cheerful, kindly like a child, constant to toil, brave to drown, for others; in the slums of cities, moving among indifferent millions to mechanical employments, without hope of change in the future, with scarce a pleasure in the present, and yet true to his virtues, honest up to his lights, kind to his neighbours, tempted perhaps in vain by the bright gin-palace, perhaps long-suffering with the drunken wife that ruins him, in India (a woman this time) kneeling with broken cries and streaming tears, as she drowns her child in the sacred river; in the brothel, the discard of society, living mainly on strong drink, fed with affronts, a fool, a thief, the comrade of thieves, and even here keeping the point of honour and the touch of pity, often repaying the world's scorn with service, often standing firm upon a scruple, and at a certain cost, rejecting riches:—everywhere some virtue cherished or affected, everywhere some decency of thought and carriage, everywhere the ensign of man's ~~ineffectual~~ goodness:—ah! if I could show you this! if I could show you these men and women all the world over, in every stage of history, under every abuse of error, under every circumstance of failure, without hope, without help, without thanks, still

obscurely fighting the lost fight of virtue, still clinging, in the brothel or on the scaffold, to some rag of honour, the poor jewel of their souls !

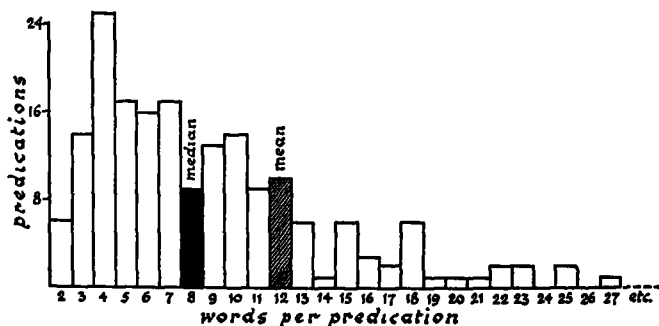
Here is a sentence of 332 words, yet I defy anyone to find in it more than ten clauses. The longest of them, a noun clause, which begins with *where we look*, and shows itself afresh after each colon or semicolon, as in *by camp-fires, in ships at sea; in the slums of cities*, and so forth—this long clause with over two hundred words to its credit is yet in its structure straight and simple enough. It runs right through the sentence like a single thread on which a few dependent clauses are beaded, and by which the general theme, *no matter where we look*, is kept square and steady before the reader's mind. Not the least of the merits of the passage is its singleness of movement. The current of the reader's thought is ever driven in the same direction. Push follows push in swift succession, each single push supporting and enforcing all the preceding pushes, till the reader begins to feel all the exhalation and excitement of a chase.

The Ruskin sentence, on the other hand, has no such simple movement. It is full of conflicting currents. Before the mind has time to get used to the movement in one direction it is pulled back and dragged in another direction. And there are no full stops to serve as resting-places.

At any rate it is clear that the size of the sentences is a somewhat precarious index of the complexity of a piece of prose. And yet it is a rough criterion. Generally speaking, when the sentences are short the prose is simple; when they are long the prose is com-

plex. And the same is true of the predications. Professor Brewster asks whether there is any standard of length in the English sentence,<sup>1</sup> and makes the odd remark that "the answer must be mainly in the negative." I suppose he means that the answer is nearer *no* than *yes*. He goes on to say, "A succession of sentences averaging less than twenty words each would impress the reader as short; averaging more than forty words as long."

The term *average* needs to be taken with caution. Sentences vary in length, and vary differently with different authors, but they never vary according to what statisticians call "the curve of normal distribution." They produce what is known as a "skew curve." This is true, not only of sentences but also of predications. Here, for instance, is a diagram show-



The distribution of the lengths of predications in Stevenson's  
*Pulvis et Umbra*.

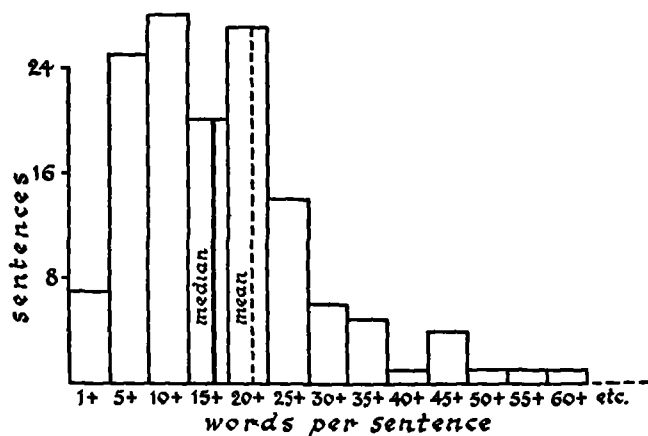
ing the frequency with which predications of different lengths occur in Stevenson's essay, *Pulvis et Umbra*.

<sup>1</sup> *The Writing of English*, by Wm. T. Brewster, p. 166.

It should be read like this: Six of the predications are two words long, 14 are three words long, 25 are four words long, and so forth. The diagram, to be complete, should be extended to the right so as to show one predication for each of the following lengths in words: 31, 32, 33, 35, 36 (two predications), 38, 44, 46, 54, 62, 64, 70, 203. To represent this adequately the drawing should tail off to the right for more than seven times as long as the part actually shown. So it is clear that the distribution is egregiously lop-sided. Which is indeed inevitable; for the extension to the left is blocked by the fact that no predication can have less than one word, while on the right it is free to stretch out indefinitely. The term *average* tells us nothing about the specific kind of grouping. Indeed, it suggests that the average lies in the middle and that the other values are grouped symmetrically about it. This, of course, is true of some kinds of measurements; but it is not true of the lengths of sentences and clauses. In the instance we are considering there are 197 predications with a total of 2,352 words, which gives by the usual method of calculation an average of twelve. But this average does not cut the series in the middle, for there are only 47 predications with more than twelve words, while there are 140 with fewer than twelve. The number that really cuts it in the middle is eight. There are just as many predications with more than eight words as there are with fewer than eight words. Such an average is called the *median*. The other average is called the *mean*. There is yet another central tendency known as the *mode*. It represents the highest peak in the curve. Here the mode is four. There are in the

essay more predications four words long than there are of any other length.

Let us now turn to sentences, as distinct from predications, and see whether they vary in the same way. The accompanying graph shows the distribution, in respect



The distribution of the lengths of the first 150 sentences in Macaulay's essay on William Pitt

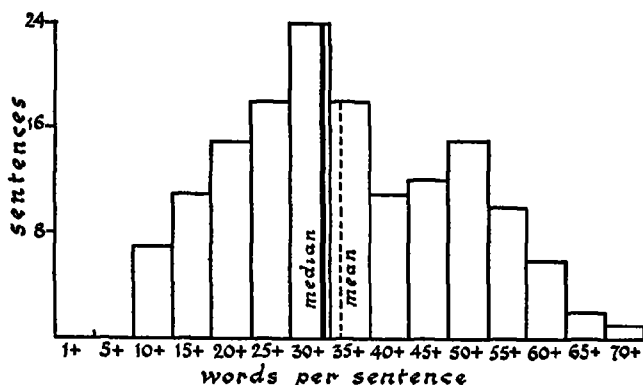
of size, of the first 150 sentences in Macaulay's essay on William Pitt. It should be read thus: Seven of the sentences have from one to four words each, 25 have from five to nine, 28 have from ten to fourteen, and so forth. The graph is not complete, for there are ten sentences of more than 65 words each which are left out through lack of room. The longest sentence of all contains 218 words. So the reader must imagine the diagram extended to the right so that the total length is nearly four times as great as the length actually

shown. This will at once suggest the wide range of the series and its peculiar mode of distribution. Between the two shortest sentences (*The women squalled* is one, and *Next went Chesterfield* is the other) and the longest there is a curious assortment of sizes, whose main characteristic is that the large sizes are few, and the small sizes many. This accounts for the bunching up of the frequencies towards the left, and their lingering attenuation towards the right. As a consequence of this peculiar distribution there is a marked difference between the mean and the median. For, as the total number of words for the 150 sentences is 3,496, the mean is over 23. But the median is only 18. In fact the mean is, as in the last instance, a very poor representative of the series, for it is so far from the middle that while there are only 49 sentences that are longer there are as many as 96 (that is, nearly twice as many) that are shorter.

Now observe the different way in which Gibbon distributes his sentences. The same number of sentences (150) were taken from *The Decline and Fall*, and their frequencies plotted as in the accompanying diagram. This graph differs from the other two in being complete. There is no extension to the right beyond what is indicated, for the longest sentence does not contain more than 72 words. And even on the left the graph does not stretch as far as Macaulay's. For Gibbon's shortest sentence has ten words as compared with Macaulay's three. So the range of Gibbon's sentences is less than a third that of Macaulay's. Gibbon uses 5,489 words for the 150 sentences, which gives a mean of 36.6. The median

is 34.5. So the mean and the median are much closer together than they are with Macaulay; which is another way of saying that the curve is more symmetrical.

These two styles present striking contrasts Macaulay



The distribution of the lengths of 150 consecutive sentences in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*.

loves the short sentence, and even the simple short sentence—simple in the grammatical sense of having but one finite verb. In fact nearly half his sentences are simple. But he balances his multitude of short sentences by a few long ones. Yet even his long sentences are simple in another sense: they avoid complexity of structure, and often aid the comprehension of the reader by means of word-patterns which are repeated over and over again. They resemble, in fact, that long sentence of Stevenson's which we have already examined. Instead of aiming at an average Macaulay aims at a wide variation. Gibbon, on the other hand, seems to aim at an average. He does not

seem to be quite happy unless he is writing a sentence which contains between 30 and 40 words. And he likes to give it a fairly involved construction. The simple sentence he uses very sparingly.

Here we have two distinct styles, and modern prose seems to be a mixture of the two. But, the reader will ask, what is modern prose? The prose of to-day varies from writer to writer just as much as the prose of yesterday. By modern prose I mean the sort of writing that is so free from eccentricities as to be accepted as normal by the educated public; a condition which is reasonably well met by the leading articles in *The Times* newspaper. The first leader leans perhaps a little towards the official style, and the last towards the style of the literary man who has a turn for humour and whimsicality. But nobody would regard the structure of the prose as open to serious criticism.

Let us therefore examine some of *The Times* leaders. The first leader in the issue on the day on which I am writing runs to 1,146 words, and has 34 sentences. That gives a mean of 33.7 words per sentence. The median is 31.5. Eighteen per cent. of the sentences are grammatically simple. Hence this leader is a Gibbonesque piece of prose. The fourth leader, however, in the same issue is of a different type. Its total of 596 words is contained in 28 sentences, which gives a mean of 21.3 words per sentence. The median, however, is only 20. The number of words in a sentence ranges from 4 to 42. As many as 46 per cent. of the sentences, including the longest sentence of all, are simple sentences. The predications of these two leaders show an equally marked

contrast; for while the mean and median in the first are 14 and 13 respectively, in the last they are 13 and 9; which signifies that the distribution in the last is considerably more lop-sided than in the first. If, therefore, we are to regard the first leader as approaching Gibbon, we must regard the last as approaching Macaulay.

At odd moments during the past four years I have computed the lengths of the sentences and clauses in *The Times* leaders, sometimes taking all the leaders together, sometimes taking the first thousand words only. It would be tedious to give the statistical details; it will be more interesting, and just as profitable, to give my general conclusions only. The mean length of the sentences varies from 30 to 36 words; but the median keeps pretty close to 30. Nearly one-fifth of the sentences are simple, and a large number contain but two clauses. Indeed, the two-clause sentence occurs more frequently than any other. The predication, which range around 13 as a mean, and 10 as a median, are slightly longer than those usually found in books. This is due partly to the necessary reference to long titles both of individuals and of institutions, and partly to a free use of participles and prepositional phrases.

The earliest copy of *The Times* kept at the British Museum bears the date September 30th, 1811. It was much smaller than the paper is to-day, for there were only four pages, and the page itself was only about half the present size. Yet the price was 6½d. Even in those early days letters to the editor were a conspicuous feature. There was no leading article marked off from

the news section, but in what seemed to be the chief column the news of the day was expressed in dignified, not to say pompous, phraseology, with sentences which ran on the average to 41 words, and clauses which ran to 11. By the year 1850 the number of pages had been increased to eight, and the price reduced to 5*d.* The leading articles, which had by that time put in an appearance, were scarcely distinguishable in style from those of to-day. The mean length of the sentence was 38 words, and of the clause 13. If there has been any change at all in *The Times* leaders during the last hundred years it has been in the direction of simplicity. The style has become slightly less Gibbonesque.

I have not been able to discover how *The Daily Telegraph* gained its reputation for turgidity of language. Its leading articles are in no way more grandiloquent than those of *The Times*. I presume, therefore, that it was its reporters who gave rise to the word *Telegraphese* as a term of reproach.

## CHAPTER X

### TOWARDS SIMPLICITY

The Professor had simplicity—the only attribute of mind common to genius and to fools.—HALLIDAY SUTHERLAND.

The sincerity and marrow of the man [Montaigne] reaches to his sentences. I know not anywhere the book that seems less written. It is the language of conversation transferred to a book. Cut these words and they would bleed; they are vascular and alive —R. W. EMERSON

As a writer gets older his prose gets simpler. At least it is so in certain noteworthy cases; Dr. Johnson's, for instance. His first book was a biography, and his last book was a biography—or rather a series of biographies, *The Lives of the Poets*. His first biography (the first of any size) was the *Life of Savage*, and this was written when he was thirty-five; his last (the last of any note), was *The Life of Gray*, and this was written when he was seventy-two. The first opens with this sentence:

It has been observed in all ages, that the advantages of nature or of fortune have contributed very little to the promotion of happiness, and that those whom the splendour of their rank, or the extent of their capacity, have placed upon the summits of human life, have not often given any just occasion to envy in those who look up to them from a lower station. whether it be that apparent superiority incites great designs, and great designs are naturally liable to fatal miscarriages; or that the general lot of mankind is misery, and the misfortunes of those whose eminence drew upon them an universal attention, have been more carefully recorded, because they were more generally observed, and have

in reality been only more conspicuous than those of others, not more frequent, or more severe.

And the *Life of Gray* begins like this:

Thomas Gray, the son of Mr. Philip Gray, a scrivener of London, was born in Cornhill, November 26, 1716.

These two sentences strike the key-notes of the two biographies. One is full of words, the other full of meat. One abounds in moral reflections expressed in long rolling periods, the other abounds in shrewd comments conveyed in short racy sentences. Here are two examples from the later book. Speaking of Gray's poems, *The Progress of Poetry* and *The Bard*, "two compositions at which the readers of poetry were at first content to gaze in mute amazement," Johnson goes on to say, "Some hardy champions undertook to rescue them from neglect, and in a short time many were content to be shown beauties which they could not see." The second example also refers to a poem: "*The Prospect of Eton College* suggests nothing to Gray which every beholder does not equally think and feel. His supplication to father *Thames*, to tell him who drives the hoop or tosses the ball, is useless and puerile. Father *Thames* has no better means of knowing than himself." These have the true conversational ring; they might have come from the pages of Boswell.

Indeed, it may plausibly be contended that as Johnson grew older his literary style moved more and more in the direction of his conversational style. He began by writing Johnsonese; he ended by writing the vulgar tongue. He began by changing the native costume of his thoughts into the costume of the classics (or what he

thought should be the costume of the classics); he ended by leaving well alone.

This tendency is here shown in tabular form:

|                                | <i>Rambler.</i> | <i>Gray.</i> | <i>Conversation.</i> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Median sentence (in words)     | . 45            | 24           | 16                   |
| Median predication (in words)  | . 10            | 8            | 7                    |
| Percentage of simple sentences | . 1             | 18           | 35                   |
| Range of sentences (in words)  | . 17-147        | 4-105        | 4-77                 |

I have taken *The Rambler* to represent Johnson's early method, as it was the first literary venture to bring him into public notice. He was then forty years of age and had got well into his stride. His favourite sentence in these early essays had either three or four clauses. At the close of his life it had only two. In his conversation it had only one, for the simple sentence predominated.

Ruskin is another instance of a writer whose prose got simpler as he grew older. This tendency is abundantly manifest in the increasing simplicity of the five separate volumes of *Modern Painters* as they were issued from time to time by the press. Seventeen years separate the first volume from the last; for the first came out in 1843, when the author was twenty-four, and the last in 1860, when he was forty-one. The reader has already seen how the first begins, for I have on page 147 quoted the opening sentence. Now note how the last volume begins:

"To dress it and to keep it."

That, then, was to be our work. Alas! what work have we set ourselves upon instead! How have we ravaged the garden instead of kept it—feeding our war-horses with its flowers, and splintering its trees into spear-shafts!

This is a very different strain from that of Volume I; a difference which becomes still more obvious when the first two chapters in each of the contrasted volumes are subjected to statistical analysis. In Volume I 4 per cent. of the sentences are simple, in Volume V 30 per cent.; in Volume I the median sentence is 43 words long, in Volume V it is only 30; in Volume I the range of sentences is from 14 to 177 words, in Volume V the range is from 5 to 153. Even the author's fondness for long sentences—a fondness he did not get over to his dying day—takes a milder form. The sentences are long and straight instead of being long and twisted. The longest sentence in Volume V has 153 words, precisely the same number as the sentence quoted on page 147. Yet its structure is much less involved, and the number of its clauses 10 instead of 18.

In Ruskin's last work, *Præterita*, the simplicity appears more in the construction of the sentences than in their length. While in the *Modern Painters* only 26 per cent. of his connectives consist of *and*, in *Præterita*, the percentage rises to 33½. And *and* is a word dear to the simple minded; the confirmed sentence-weaver has no great liking for it.

Ruskin himself was well aware of his early weakness for ornate writing; for when, in 1883, he issued a revised edition of Volume II of *Modern Painters*, which he had first published thirty-seven years before, he split up some of the longer sentences, and made caustic comments on some of the others. Here are some of his footnotes: "This rather astounding paragraph was anciently parted from the preceding text only by a semicolon! I have fenced it at least with two full-

stops." [It would, by the way, still stand a little more fencing.] "Too fast and far again! by much; the impetus of phrase running away with me. See the mischief of fine writing." "The literary art and pedantry of [this paragraph] are now very grievous to me." "A long, affected, and obscure sentence, written in imitation of Hooker. A short sentence from Proverbs is the sum of it: 'How can one be warm alone?' " "In simpler terms this I suppose means that angels must not be wrinkled or saints frown." In the text he remarks that unity is essential to the perfection of beauty in lines, colours, or forms, and this is the note he appends: "Yes, I should rather think so; and they ought to have been named separately, too, and very slowly; and not upset in a heap on the floor as they are in this terrific two-page sentence." One of his last notes is: "I cannot but wonder more and more at the obstinacy of the public in calling these early books my best writing." If Ruskin still takes an interest in mundane things, he may cease wondering; the public is no longer obstinate. In fact it does not read the earlier books at all, while some of the later and simpler books, such as *Sesame and Lilies* and *Unto This Last*, run into edition after edition.

I doubt whether Johnson's simplification was as deliberate as Ruskin's. For, without any kind of apology or comment, he dumps his early *Life of Savage* right in the middle of his later *Lives* as though it were of a piece with all the others. Yet it stands out like a patch of rich brocade on a plain work-a-day garment. The two discordant styles stand side by side, without any hint from the author as to which of the two he

prefers. I have an uneasy feeling that he still considered the earlier style the more correct, but couldn't be bothered with labouring his sentences as in his earlier and more vigorous days. He himself in his diary confesses his indolence; but as he makes similar confessions all through his life, we must not attach too much weight to that piece of evidence. Of greater evidential value, and in this case pointing to a conscious change of ideals, is the fact that when the *Lives* were printed as a separate edition (they were first attached as Prefaces to the works of the poets themselves), Johnson undertook the task of revising them. Yet his emendations, a list of which is given by Boswell, are not by way of making the easy difficult, but of making the hazy definite and clear-cut.

Boswell makes this remark: "So easy is his style in these *Lives* that I do not recollect more than three uncommon or learned words." And he proved a true prophet when he wrote, "This is the work which of all Dr. Johnson's writings will perhaps be read most generally, and with most pleasure." Nobody now reads *Rasselas*, *The Rambler*, or *The Idler*; many still read *The Lives of the Poets* with profit and delight; and all the world reads the conversations recorded in the pages of Boswell.

Not all writers get simpler as they grow older. Some move in the opposite direction; Henry James, for instance. Beginning with a style which was as direct and straightforward as anyone could wish, James ended up with a style which was so tortuous and involved that none but a small coterie could read it. Indeed, so distinctly marked are his early period, his

middle period, and his later period, that Mr. Philip Guedalla has assured us that there were really three Jameses—James the First, James the Second, and the Old Pretender. The average sentence of the first period ran to 30 words, of the second period to 40 words, and of the last period to 69 words.<sup>1</sup> He paid the penalty of his increasing complexity by a decreasing circle of readers. I myself am outside the last circle. Some years ago, a learned colleague who was old and ill complained to me that he could no longer read German; it made his legs feel queer. I know that feeling well; I have had it while trying to read Henry James in his last period.

✓ Let us now consider attempts that have been made to simplify the learning of our language by reducing it to its basic elements. If a foreigner wants to learn English, what words should he learn first? Evidently the commonest. Not the shortest, nor the easiest to remember, but those in most frequent use. But which are in most frequent use? The dictionary does not tell us, nor does the grammar book. In fact, until quite recent years nobody could answer the question. And that was because, if the question was raised at all, nobody would go to the trouble of counting the words—the only way of finding the answer. A word census had to be made. And it has been made, more than once; but always in America, not in England. The most reliable and comprehensive of them was carried out by Professor E. L. Thorndike, of Teachers' College,

<sup>1</sup> These are rough estimates based on an examination of the opening chapters of *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and *Within the Rum* (1913).

Columbia University. Aided by a small band of helpers, he undertook the colossal task of counting and classifying between five and six million words derived from forty-one different sources. Three million of them came from the English Bible and the English classics; the rest came from school text-books, from literature for the young, from the daily newspapers, from private correspondence, and from books about special trades, such as cooking, sewing, and farming.

So the range was pretty wide; and both range and frequency were taken into account in giving to each word a credit-number, which served as an index of its importance. "*Range*," as Professor Thorndike explains, "answers the question, 'How many of these forty-one different sources use the word?' or 'How widely is the word used?'" *Frequency* answers the question, 'How often is the word used?'" As a result of the census Dr. Thorndike published in 1921 *The Teacher's Word Book*, which contains an alphabetical list of the most important 10,000 words in the language, each word being assigned a credit-number. Finally, it gives a separate list of the first 500 in importance, then a list of the next 500, and so on up to the fifth 500.

*Thorndike's Word Book* is extensively used in America, for there the task of teaching the immigrants English is a perennial problem; and the *Word Book* does something to lighten the task. The word-counting plan has been extended to foreign languages. For the vocabulary problem is just as acute in teaching the English-speaking boy French as in teaching the French boy English.

The word-counting method has not yet been used in England, unless it is the means by which Mr. C. K. Ogden has selected his vocabulary for Basic English. He says himself that the words have been "scientifically selected," but he gives no details. Basic English deserves our attention, not only because it is an interesting attempt at simplifying the English language for the benefit of foreigners, but because most extraordinary claims are made on its behalf. It certainly appears simple. Its vocabulary consists of 850 words, all of which can be written on the back of a sheet of note-paper. As many as 600 of them are nouns, 18 are verbs (or, as Mr. Ogden prefers to call them, *operators*), 21 are prepositions (or *directives*), and the rest are qualifiers, modifiers, etc. The author of the system claims that by means of this small group of words "ordinary communication in idiomatic English can be effected."<sup>1</sup>

Not only is the vocabulary simplified, but the rules of grammar as well. The whole of English Grammar is, in fact, comprised within the compass of nine small pages of print. We begin to wonder how Mr. Ogden can manage to get along with only 18 verbs. The answer is that the meanings of all the verbs excluded from his list can be expressed by compounding the 18 operators (or rather 15, for 3 of them are auxiliaries), either with directives or with nouns. For example, the operator *put* is in the list, and so is the directive *in*; it is therefore unnecessary to include *insert* because its meaning can be conveyed by *put in*. The nouns *move* and *motion* are included among the nouns;

<sup>1</sup> *Basic English*, by C. K. Ogden, p. 7.

therefore it is unnecessary to include *move* among the operators, for

“Move = Give (a thing) a move, or put (a thing) in motion.”<sup>1</sup>

Most of the new verbs are compounds of verbs and adverbs or of verbs and prepositions, such as *go under*, *get out*, *make up*, *put away*, *take in*, *give over*, and so forth. They are a class of verbs indigenous to Britain. Dr. Johnson has this to say about them in the Preface to his *Dictionary*:

There is another kind of composition more frequent in our language than perhaps in any other, from which arises to foreigners the greatest difficulty. We modify the signification of many words by a particle subjoined, as *come off*, to escape by a fetch; to *fall on*, to attack, to *fall off*, to apostatise, to *break off*, to stop abruptly; to *bear out*, to justify, to *fall in*, to comply, to *give over*, to cease; to *set off*, to embellish, to *set in*, to begin a continual tenour, to *set out*, to begin a course or journey; to *take off*, to copy; with innumerable expressions of the same kind, of which some appear widely irregular, being so far distant from the sense of the simple words, that no sagacity will be able to trace the steps by which they arrived at the present use.

Numerous as these compound verbs were in Dr. Johnson's day, they have become much more numerous since. Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith has pointed out that the nineteenth century was especially rich in this kind of formation and gave birth to many such modern expressions as *to boil down*, *to go under*, *to hang on*, *to back down*, *to own up*, *to take over*, *to run across*.<sup>2</sup> He also shows that each of these combinations has many meanings. “Thus to *go on* can mean *to proceed*, *to continue*, *to behave reprehensively* (in fact to *carry on*), and it has recently come

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> *The English Language*, p. 83.

to mean *to talk volubly*—(*how he did go on!*) To *get on* is to mount, to hurry, to prosper, to grow old, to be on good terms with someone. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites fifty-two meanings of *take up*, and sixty-seven of *set up*.”<sup>1</sup>

It is assumed by Mr. Ogden that when the student of Basic English has learnt the meanings of the separate words in the Basic vocabulary he has learnt the meaning of their combination. If, for instance, he knows the meaning of *come*, and the meaning of *off*, he knows at once all the meanings of *come off*. He even knows that it means *to escape by a fetch* (a jolly phrase to know). How much truth is there in this? By what process of reasoning can a man who is quite conversant with the separate meanings of *put*, of *up*, and of *with* ever infer that *to put up with* means *to endure*? We might as reasonably expect the person who has discovered the several properties of carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen to infer from them the amazing properties of alcohol. In neither case do the elements afford a clue to the nature of the compound. The difficulty of compounding meanings is illustrated by this comment made by Mr. Pearsall Smith on the use of *right away* for *immediately*: “This (American idiom) is now understood by Englishmen, but puzzled Dickens, who, when he arrived at an American hotel and was asked whether he would have his dinner ‘right away,’ replied, after some thought, that he would prefer to have it where he was.”

The truth of the matter is that it is more difficult to learn these patch-work verbs than it is to learn entirely new vocables; more difficult because more puzzling and

<sup>1</sup> *Words and Idioms*, p. 254.

confusing. Natives, in fact, learn them as new vocables; they pick up their meanings by hearing them used as verbal wholes, not by putting together the meanings of their parts. And to ask the foreigner to put the meanings of the parts together in order to arrive at the meaning of the whole is to set him on the wrong track. He gets as bewildered as the Frenchman who called on an English friend and was told he was not *up*, and calling later was told he was not *down*. He then inquired when he was *between*. Foreigners, in fact, are always perplexed by these particles. And it is for foreigners that Basic English has been specially designed.

Just as the simplicity of the Basic vocabulary is misleading, so is the simplicity of the grammatical rules. One of the rules for derivatives, for instance, is: "Noun with *er* suffix = Thing or person performing operation." Apply this rule to *dresser*, *archer*, *boiler*, *joiner*, *shutter*, and *stopper*. Then, again, the use of *un-* as a universal negative leads to such curiosities as *uncomplete*, *unfree*, *unprobable*, *unregular*, *unsmooth*, *unsolid*, etc. In fact Mr. Ogden succeeds in getting his English simple at the expense of getting it wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Ogden's purpose is one with which all will sympathise, and his ingenuity is worthy of all admiration; but he has, it seems to me, lost his way at two points. He has tried to simplify the language instead

<sup>1</sup> Those who wish to gain a more detailed knowledge of Basic English should read, in addition to Mr. Ogden's own book, *A Critical Examination of Basic English*, Bulletin No. 2 of the Department of Educational Research, Ontario College of Education, University of Toronto, by M. P. West, E. Swenson, and others. (University of Toronto Press, Toronto.)

of trying to simplify the teaching of the language; and he has represented his system as simpler than it really is. "The real strength of Basic," he contends, "lies in the fact that it can avoid all appeal to authority. It is already so simple that it can be mastered theoretically in a day, practically in a week, orientally (i.e. in the most unfavourable circumstances) in a month."<sup>1</sup> Nobody can learn a language in a week. He may in that time learn something that is called Basic, but he cannot learn something that is called English.

Other attempts have been made to simplify the learning of English for the foreigner, notably those of Dr. Michael West in India, and Mr. Harold Palmer in Japan. And these systems have proved their worth by practical application on the spot. They are not revolutionary systems, nor do they aim at creating a new language. They take the language as it is, but are careful to distinguish between the important elements and the unimportant elements. And, indeed, their task is more difficult than the one with which America is confronted. For it is one thing to teach a foreigner English in an English environment; and another thing to teach a foreigner English in a foreign environment. The environment is everything, if it is allowed to be fully effective. It does all the counting of words that is needed, and itself looks after the frequency and range. It is the natural source and stimulus of language just as air is the natural stimulus of flying and water of swimming.

In fact the best way to learn a language is to shut oneself off from every other language; hearing no other,

<sup>1</sup> *Basic English*, pp. 82-3.

speaking no other, and, if possible, thinking no other, for weeks on end. It is learning the language by living the language.

As for the simplification of English, that has been going on slowly and steadily all through the ages. In its use as the currency of thought its asperities are gradually being worn down; the bad coins are being laid aside and the most useful kept in constant circulation. This is a natural development of which the main agency is the masses of the people. That the process can be speeded up I have no doubt, but not by ignoring the forces of nature. To formulate a fixed system is like nailing up a weather-cock to keep the wind in the west.

## CHAPTER XI

### STYLE

Style is the dress of thoughts.—LORD CHESTERFIELD.

Le style est l'homme même.—BUFFON.

The theory of legal procedure is that if you set two liars to expose one another, the truth will emerge.—G. BERNARD SHAW.

NOBODY writes about style without quoting Buffon; which, indeed, is inevitable. For Buffon puts forward an opinion which is the exact opposite of the popular opinion, and which becomes more and more plausible the more its opposite is examined. In fact, Buffon is believed to be right merely because Demos is seen to be wrong. Yet the truth is that neither is wholly right, and neither wholly wrong.

The popular belief is that style in language is very much like style in dress. It changes as the fashion changes. And as a person can change his clothes as often as he likes and still remain the same person, so can a thought be clothed in different words and yet remain precisely the same thought. Thus it is possible to express the same idea in English, in French, in Chinese, and in the language of the Fiji Islanders. And if we admit the existence of pure thought we virtually admit that an idea may remain its unchanged self in whatever garments it is decked out. *This landscape is lovely* and *This view is beautiful* are but two ways of saying the same thing; and *How are you?* is no

different as a salutation from *How do you do?* If a man thinks of saying, *He came home drunk*, and then changes his mind and actually says, *He returned to his residence in a state of intoxication*, he has not really changed his mind but changed its clothes. He has stripped an idea of its home-spun and arrayed it in finery. The idea stays the same.

All this, says the Buffonite, is dead wrong. The relation between a word and its meaning is far more intimate than that; and is, moreover, fixed and immutable. How the tie between the two was first determined is of no consequence; it does not matter whether it is an inherent and natural bond pre-ordained from the foundation of the world, or whether it is a mere conventional bond forged by the arbitrary will of man. What matters is that the bond is fixed, and once fixed will remain fixed. When an idea is conceived in the mind it is conceived in a form of words. The idea exists in the words, is embodied in the words, lives in the words; in those particular words and those particular words only. Change the words, however slightly, and you inevitably change the idea as well. Change the idea and you are forced to use different words. The two things run absolutely parallel and share the same fate: they come into the mind together, they vary in the mind together, they fade out of the mind together. Indissolubly wedded, they are of one mind and one flesh. In the commonwealth of words there is neither polygamy nor polyandry. One word one meaning, one meaning one word, is the rigid and inviolable law. It follows that there are no synonyms—no real synonyms—only rough approximations. A

spade must be called a spade and nothing else. To call it a shovel is to give it a name which really belongs to a slightly different object, and which even if it means the same object rouses different reverberations in the mind. To say *This landscape is lovely* is certainly not the same as to say *This view is beautiful*; for the noun *landscape* is of narrower application than the noun *view*, and the word *lovely* strikes a deeper emotional note than the word *beautiful*. Nor are the two greetings *How are you ?* and *How do you do ?* of precisely the same import. The former is more of a question than a salutation, and the latter more of a salutation than a question. And the expression *He came home drunk* has not only more strength than the expression *He returned to his residence in a state of intoxication*, but suggests a greater degree of condemnation and contempt.<sup>1</sup>

All this is true. It will readily be admitted that if we vary the expression we vary the idea. But the argument can be carried much further than that. For it can be shown that if we don't vary the expression we still vary the idea. If a speaker, addressing an attentive audience of a thousand people, says, *The country is going to the dogs*, he has not engendered one idea, but a thousand ideas; for each hearer interprets the words in his own way, and his own way depends on his own background of knowledge; and as there are a thousand different backgrounds there are a thousand different ideas

In fact there is no fixity in the meanings of words any more than there is in anything else. All is subject to

<sup>1</sup> This point of view is stoutly defended in Chap. VI of Arnold Bennett's *Literary Taste*.

the universal flux. Words, as we have already seen, have no meanings in themselves; all the meanings they have are imparted to them by living people. There are certain steadying forces, such as the nation's literature, and the close social intercourse between the coming generation and the passing generation—forces which tend to give stability and continuity to those meanings; but they can give no permanence to what is so largely dependent on the vagaries of human nature and human society. Each generation passes on its heritage of language with something of its own image and superscription left upon it. It thus happens that changes which seem slight and slow at close view, become large and startling when looked at from a wider angle. Much of the language of Shakespeare's day is almost unintelligible to the mass of people to-day; and many of the words in common use to-day bore a very different significance a hundred years ago.

It is only by assuming these large secular changes that we can account for the wide differences in the languages that belong to one and the same group. The Indo-European tongues, for instance, are all supposed to have sprung from one common stock. And as each has moved further and further away from its source, so has it also drifted further and further away from its kith and kin. So that languages which, like the Rhine and the Rhone, began close together have, like the Rhine and the Rhone, ended by being hundreds of miles apart. Certain natural forces must have been at work to produce these profound changes; and to believe that these natural forces have ceased to operate, or ever will cease to operate, is to believe that the moon

will cease to draw the tides, and the winds to mould the surface of the sea.

We must, in fact, accept the plain truth that the bond between word and meaning (and by *word* I mean a group of words as well) is frail and precarious. It was neither forged nor kept constant by any physical forces. Indeed, the only forces that count in this regard—the forces that act through human nature—tend to keep it elastic and variable. Against these natural forces, pedants and purists fight in vain. They are but glorified Mrs. Partingtons trying to mop up the Atlantic.

This being so, the theory of *le mot juste* falls to the ground. The cult of *le mot juste*, or the inevitable word, arose in France in the nineteenth century, with Gustave Flaubert as its high priest, and many young writers on both sides of the Channel as his ardent disciples. It taught that there was one, and only one, perfect way of expressing an idea, and that it was the duty of the elect to seek it diligently till they found it. And many partisans of this creed would spend hours and even days searching for the right adjective, or the right phrase, or the right turn of expression. And false as the doctrine is as a universal law, it has quite enough truth in it to keep it alive. And in practice it is harmless enough; nay, even fruitful and beneficent. For by inciting the writer to self-criticism, to constant vigilance and revision, and to a persistent effort towards lucidity and order, it relieves the reader of all unnecessary trouble and fatigue in following the sense. The bigger share of the burden of transmission the writer takes upon his own shoulders; which is of course where it should be.

He takes Schopenhauer's advice in remembering "that thought so far follows the law of gravity that it travels from head to paper much more easily than from paper to head."

If the doctrine of *le mot juste* does nothing else, it at least fosters the salutary truth that the first words that present themselves to the mind are not necessarily the best words; nor is the first order of the words the best order. It thus leads to experiment with words and their sequence; to the pondering of alternative modes of expression; and to the rejection of the worse in favour of the better. The principles of selection and organisation will vary with the writer; but the fact that he selects and organises at all is enough to distinguish him from the rank and file. It is enough to give his writings "style." That, at any rate, is the only meaning I can attach to the vague assertion, "Mr. So-and-so has style." He has style if he takes trouble with his prose. It does not mean, or at least it should not mean, that his style is good. It may be a very vicious and detestable style.

As an example of a styleless writer I may mention Dr Stanley Hall. He had learning, he had influence, he had a facile pen; but he had no style. Open any one of his voluminous works at any page and you are as likely as not to come across sentences of this kind:

In nothing does the unwritten tradition, custom, spirit, moral tone of one college differ quite so much from that of another. These are as diverse, indeed, as the professional rules of medicine, which has its own ethical code, of labour organisations which have another, of lawyers, journalists and teachers, which are more unformulated, and of the army and military schools, which are

most highly evolved of all (witness the stories of Nathan Hale, Samuel Davis, Major Wirz, the Dreyfus case and many a noble tale from regulars down, and of those who have preferred death to treason).<sup>1</sup>

Ideas were poured out from Stanley Hall's fertile mind like bricks tipped from a cart. He was far too impatient to spend time in arranging and rearranging them. He was content if they held together grammatically. Our own Professor Saintsbury had a similar type of mind.

Now for an example of a man who has style but would be better without it. We are assured that he has style, for he is described in the preface to his book as "an author and journalist of a high order." He took over the results of experiments and researches made by an American psychologist and "wrote them up" for the public in this fashion:

The classification of individuals relative to one another and with reference to the possession of a particular mental ability or group of abilities is, therefore, necessarily based upon their relative ability to express in some intelligible and unmistakable fashion their mental power and qualities.

This appears to be his stylistic way of saying that if we wish to arrange people in order of merit in respect of any mental quality, we must ask them questions and judge their answers.

We are now better able to consider in what sense it is true that a writer's style is the writer's self. The aphorism is one of those vague and oracular statements which may be given many different interpretations,

<sup>1</sup> *Educational Problems*, Vol. I, p. 321.

some of which are obviously true, and others flagrantly false. It is obviously true that a man's education and experience influence his style. A Frenchman writes French rather than German; a scholarly person will not write illiterate prose. It is obviously true that the core of a man's personality—his inner self, his innate impulses and interests—influences his style. For this inner and deeper self is not wholly the passive victim of experience: in a certain measure it makes its own experience; and in the same measure it makes its own style. On the other hand, it is flagrantly false that a man's literary style is a mirror of himself. If it is, it is a very bad mirror, sometimes blurred and often cracked. From Rousseau's *Confessions* we can, apart from its contents, discover much about Rousseau himself. But there is one thing we cannot discover; and that is whether he is a truth-teller or a liar. We cannot, in fact, argue from the man to the style; nor yet back again from the style to the man. Those who take refuge in the phrase *Le style est l'homme même* are often merely throwing up the sponge. They confess that style is as mysterious as personality, and equally unique and inexplicable.

To the extent that a man's likes and dislikes reflect his personality, his style is a rough index of himself. For style always implies choice. Rarely is a man so simple or so illiterate that he has no choice of styles at his disposal. Either consciously or unconsciously he accepts some modes of expression and rejects others. Even an affected style marks a striving towards some sort of ideal. Much has already been said about soliloquy or inner speech; and much more remains

to be said. For that is the important stage at which thought is conceived in the mind; and the stage at which style really begins. For if an idea is not conceived in the form of words, it is at least conceived in the presence of words. And the idea and the words are, for some reason or other, inextricably tangled up together. And the words and phrases which have welled up from the unconscious are largely determined by what the mind has previously loved and pondered. And when elaboration begins; when the thinker chooses and marshals his words in order to render them fit for utterance through his lips or his pen, he is again influenced by certain standards of right and wrong, of good and bad, of shapely and unshapely. In fact he gives his prose a pattern that pleases him.

And he gives it a rhythm that pleases him too. Everybody's head is full of those irregular rhythms which occur in prose. He cannot escape them. He cannot speak without them; he cannot write without them. He cannot even say good morning without giving it one or other of these two rhythms: ˘ — ˘, — — ˘. The sentence I am writing at this moment, and indeed every sentence in the book, has a definite rhythm which I distinctly hear in my head before I commit the words to paper. And, unless his imagination of sounds is inordinately weak, the reader as he reads in silence will hear it too.

This is so obvious that it seems superfluous to mention it. What is not so obvious is that out of the infinite number of possible rhythms there are some which specially appeal to the speaker or writer, and some which specially repel him. And, whether he is

aware of it or not, his choice of words is partly determined by this secret predilection; a predilection which first shows itself in the words that spontaneously occur to his mind, and subsequently in any revision he may happen to make. In some people this predilection is very strong; but in the majority it is so weak that it manifests itself in a negative form only. There are certain rhythms which they dislike; to the rest they are indifferent. A writer often feels that at a certain point his sentence does not flow easily—does not yield what seems to him an agreeable rhythm. And he may find that by some such simple trick as substituting a word of two syllables for a word of one syllable he can remove the obstruction; or he may find it necessary to run his sentence into an entirely new channel.

No one can, however, inexorably fix the rhythm of a piece of prose by merely getting it printed. He has the reader to reckon with. And the reader, though he is tied down by the accepted accents of the longer words, can do almost what he likes with monosyllables. One expects to hear from the reading-desk in church but one rendering of the passage *All is vanity and vexation of spirit*; but how about this one? *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light*. Where should the stresses come? In the days of my youth the main emphasis was laid on the three words, *God, light, and was*; nowadays it is given to the words, *God, light, and light*. In fact rhythm is inextricably mixed up with intonation and emphasis, and, to a certain extent, shares their variability.

The rhythm of a piece of prose is not merely a small matter of feet and stresses, but also a large matter of

pace and movement over wide stretches. The ripples are carried forward on the backs of large irregular waves. These larger waves are made up of such groups of words as form easy units of utterance. For just as music is phrased for convenience of singing, so may a piece of prose be phrased for convenience of speaking. The sentence which I am now writing, with its resting-places marked by two commas, is a good example of a sentence with three long speaking units. Its points of cleavage are determined not on the ground of grammar but on the ground of rhetoric. Its three sections can be spoken in three breaths, each a little longer than its predecessor. And the middle one, mark you, is eight words long.

That same sentence will serve as an example of a rhythmic pattern which is pretty common in English prose. Its formula is *A, B, and C*, with B generally (but not always) bigger than A, and C always biggest of all. Here are a few examples:

Kings, lords, and commons.

Faith, hope, and charity.

The good, the true, and the beautiful.

The world, the flesh, and the devil.

Friends, Romans, countrymen

I came, I saw, I conquered

First the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear —*St Mark*.

Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them —*Shakespeare*.

He lets me feed with his hinds, bars me the place of a brother, and, as much as in him lies, mines my gentility with my education. —*Shakespeare*.

The way was long, the wind was cold, the minstrel was infirm and old. —*Scott*.

It was reprinted in a few months; it was translated into Latin, French, and Italian, and it seems to have at once established the literary reputation of its author —*Macaulay*

For whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God. —*Ruth*.

She (Nature) has given him limbs, she has given him brains, she has given him the rudiments of a soul.—*Lowes Dickinson*.

The birds sang loud, the fountain sparkled, and the trees rustled softly in the early breeze —*Lowes Dickinson*.

A clear fire, a clean hearth, and the rigour of the game.—*Charles Lamb*.

His intellect was of the shallowest It did not reach to a saw or a proverb. His mind was in its original state of white paper.—*Charles Lamb*.

To laugh at such is Mr Punch's business. May he laugh honestly, hit no foul blow, and tell the truth when at his very broadest grin—never forgetting that if Fun is good, Truth is still better, and Love best of all —*W. M. Thackeray*.

The first stanza of Gray's *Elegy* is of this pattern, the last item—a sentence with a double predicate—taking up two out of the four lines. This, however, is not the only pattern of the *A, B, and C* type. For sometimes the items diminish in size, instead of increasing; as, for example:

Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

There is yet another variety of the triad—one in which the middle item is the largest, as in *plague, pestilence, and famine*. This, however, is rare. The most usual pattern is the first that I have illustrated, and the rarest of all that in which the three units are approximately the same size.

This is but one of the many rhythmic patterns with which every language abounds. There are other patterns, too, which have little to do with rhythm but have much to do with grammar. Indeed, so far as our own language is concerned, the older grammar of accident has largely been superseded by a newer grammar of pattern. The order of the words, which is an essential element in their pattern, determines their syntactical relations. And all these word patterns, whatever their nature and whatever their size, are impressed upon our minds by countless repetitions, from countless sources, in countless circumstances; all of which vary with the individual. When, therefore, a person shows a preference for some patterns over others, it is due either to his education or to his innate taste. Probably to both. But whether due to nature or to nurture, the preference will show itself in his style. And again the style reveals the man.

Tricks of speech, queer modes of expression, mannerisms of various kinds—all are catching; but those who take the infection already have a predisposition to the disease. Sydney Smith, in his comments on the sesquipedalian style of Dr. Parr, remarks:

[There are many men of learning] of whom Dr. Parr might be happy to say, that they have profundity without obscurity—perspicuity without prolixity—ornament without glare—terse-ness without barrenness—penetration without subtlety—comprehensiveness without digression—and a great number of other things without a great number of other things.<sup>1</sup>

This peculiar form of expression, beloved by orators of the orotund school, and constituting a great

<sup>1</sup> *Edinburgh Review*, 1802.

standby for writers of testimonials whose vocabulary of praise has worn thin—this *A without B* habit of utterance must have started somewhere. Who began it? I can trace it back as far as this:

I praise God for you, sir. your reasons at dinner have been sharp and sententious pleasant without scurrility, witty without affection, audacious without impudency, learned without opinion, and strange without heresy.<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare puts these words into the mouth of Sir Nathaniel the curate in *Love's Labour's Lost*—into the mouth of another preacher, you will note. My scanty knowledge of pre-Shakespearean literature does not enable me to trace the habit further back; but I have little doubt that Shakespeare was doing just the same as Sydney Smith—poking fun at the parsons.<sup>2</sup>

From a person's style we can often infer what he has read. But not always; not unless the King's English is used. What inferences, for instance, can we draw from the following passage? It is taken, not from a treatise on Energetics, but from a recent book on the humane subject of Language:

Symbolic integration, as we sec, furnishes a remarkable mechanism for the mobilization of group action into a unitary co-ordina

<sup>1</sup> *Love's Labour's Lost*, v, 1.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Dr F. S. Boas for the following note: "The 'A without B' trick is to be found in Sidney's *Arcadia*, where, in an early passage of the romance, he speaks, in describing Parthenia, of 'her silence without sullenness, her modestie without affectation; her shamefastness without ignorance.' As the first edition of the *Arcadia* appeared in 1590, Shakespeare may have had this particular passage in mind. In any case it illustrates the 'A without B' mannerism."

tion. The brain which is a functional part of the symbolic process is admirably constructed to facilitate the domination and utilization of the "vital" or "energetic" reserves of the individual in group behaviour. In humans, the cerebral mechanisms include highly specialized secondary associational centres which are free from specific contextual relations and thus are operative as general connections for whatever activity is under way, thus drawing in other behaviour resources.

The author, a Professor of Sociology, has evidently aimed at making an impersonal statement of fact. He has tried to be scientific and to get away from the ambiguities of the vulgar tongue. And he has succeeded. The trouble is, however, that he has got so far away that he is out of sight.

Let me now quote quite a different kind of author, one from whose style it is not difficult to infer some, at least, of the sources of his culture. In the following paragraph from William James's <sup>1</sup> *Principles of Psychology* I have left out two words, and I invite the reader to fill in the blanks.

This is probably the reason why, if we look at an isolated printed word and repeat it long enough, it ends by assuming an entirely unnatural aspect. Let the reader try this with any word on this page. He will soon begin to wonder if it can possibly be the word he has been using all his life with that meaning. It stares at him from the paper like a glass eye, with no — in it. Its body is indeed there, but its soul is fled. It is reduced, by this new way of attending to it, to its sensational nudity. We never before attended to it in this way, but habitually got it clad with its meaning the moment we caught sight of it, and rapidly passed from it to the other words of the phrase. We apprehended it, in short, with a — of associates, and thus perceiving it, we felt it quite otherwise than as we feel it now divested and alone.

<sup>1</sup> *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, pp. 80 and 81.

The reader, having made an honest, and no doubt successful, guess at the missing words, will agree that William James would not have chosen those particular words had he not read the following:

Avaunt ! and quit my sight ! Let the earth hide thee !  
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;  
Thou hast no *speculation* in those eyes  
Which thou dost glare with.—*Shakespeare's "Macbeth."*

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a *cloud* of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.—*St. Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews.*

It will thus be seen that there is good ground for the view that a man's literary style affords some evidence as to his nature and his nurture; for it undoubtedly tells us something about his tastes and his habits, about the company he keeps and about the books he has read. But does it enable us to identify the man? Has every man a style of his own? Dr. Johnson has a pertinent remark to make on this point: "Why, Sir, I think every man whatever has a peculiar style, which may be discovered by nice examination and comparison with others: but a man must write a great deal to make his style obviously discernible. As logicians say, this appropriation of style is infinite in *potestate*, limited in *actu*."<sup>1</sup> The question, in fact, is of no greater practical import than a host of other questions, such as, "Has every man a peculiar walk, or a peculiar accent, or a peculiar nose?" And the answer in each case is,

<sup>1</sup> Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (Birkbeck Hill's edition), Vol. III, p. 280.

"Yes, of course he has." But we don't make a fuss about it and gravely assert, "The walk (or the accent, or the nose) is the man himself." Nor do we think that the differences, in the rank and file and people, are of any magnitude or of any importance.

Herbert Spencer looks at style from a different angle. Shifting the limelight from the discourse to the audience, he points out that it is the sayee, and not the saying, that can tell us whether the style is good or bad. If the discourse is so worded as to enable the meaning to slip easily into the recipient's mind, the style is good; if not, it is bad. So the quality of the style is measured by the strain on the attention of the audience. The less the strain the better the style. Lucidity is the sovereign merit. It is true that others, from Quintilian down to Quiller-Couch, have stressed the value of lucidity; but Herbert Spencer was the first to translate lucidity into terms of attention, and to bring home to us its relative nature. A piece of prose that is clear as crystal to one person may be quite incomprehensible to another. Again we are brought up against the vital fact that the audience cannot be ignored.

It follows, too, that there is one standard of clearness for the spoken word, and another for the written. For the conditions of reception are different. The reader makes his own pace; the listener has his pace made for him.

I know of nobody who has more shrewd and stimulating things to say about style than Schopenhauer.<sup>1</sup> He regards style as the physiognomy of the mind, and

<sup>1</sup> Schopenhauer's Essay on Style will be found in *The Art of Literature*, translated by Bailey Saunders, pp. 17-38

a safer index to character than the face. He contends that if the thought is sharp and clear, the style, which is nothing but the silhouette of thought, will be sharp and clear too. We can think clearly of only one thing at a time, and must not try, by overloading our sentences, to make the reader think of two or three things at a time. It only confuses him.

Mark Twain has told us that "whenever the literary German dives into a sentence, that is the last you are going to see of him till he emerges on the other side of the Atlantic with the verb in his mouth." Schopenhauer is equally caustic in his remarks on his fellow-countrymen. He complains that they over-complicate their sentences; that they break the principal sentence into bits and shove other sentences into the cracks. "The Frenchman," he goes on to say, "strings his thoughts together, as far as he can, in the most logical and natural order, and lays them before the reader one after the other for convenient deliberation, so that every one of them may receive undivided attention. The German, on the other hand, weaves them together into a sentence which he twists and crosses, and crosses and twists again; because he wants to say six things all at once, instead of advancing them one by one."

Parentheses he dislikes, especially if they are so inserted as to shatter the sentence. He points out that "if it is an impertinent thing to interrupt another person when he is speaking, it is no less impertinent to interrupt oneself."

All writers on style, even the most complex of them, praise simplicity. Walter Pater, for example. He

praises simplicity in a sentence of sixty-three words. Here it is:

Say what you have to say, what you have a will to say, in the simplest, the most direct and exact manner possible, with no surplusage; there is the justification of the sentence so fortunately born, "entire, smooth, and round," that it needs no punctuation, and also (that is the point !) of the most elaborate period, if it be right in its elaboration.

Note how artfully Pater twists this defence of simplicity into a defence of complexity. What he is really praising is not simplicity at all but precision of language. We are advised to say our say in the most exact manner possible, even if it demands elaborate periods, or, as he calls them elsewhere, "victoriously intricate sentences."

William Cobbett also praises simplicity, but tries to secure it in the wrong way. In his famous *Grammar*, he says to his son:

Never think of mending what you write. Let it go No patching; no after-pointing As your pen moves, bear constantly in mind that it is making strokes which are to remain for ever.

And again:

Use the first words that occur to you, and never attempt to alter a thought, for that which has come of itself into your mind is likely to pass into that of another more readily and with more effect than anything which you can, by reflection, invent.

Taken at its surface value, this is about as bad a piece of advice as could possibly be given. Nothing is more certain than that our thoughts do not, except perhaps in rare moments of inspiration, occur to us either in the

best order or in the best words. Simplicity, directness, and lucidity are not qualities that naturally and inevitably belong to thought and language at the source; they are the reward of a stubborn pursuit. Thought at the source is vague and formless. It is as elusive as the wind until it can clutch at words or some other sort of communicable sign. And the first words at which it clutches are not necessarily the best words, nor is their first sequence the best sequence. Meditation must do its work. For meditation is the means by which the thinker makes his thoughts clear to himself. It follows that first thoughts are not the best, nor even second thoughts. Thinking must go on until the thoughts are clear and coherent; and they are only clear and coherent when they have been happily wedded to words, the wedding having been preceded by a period of courtship.

It is well to remember that the ceremony takes place at different stages with different people. Some people start writing before the event and some after. Those who start before have to revise and revise and revise; and it often happens that only after many flirtations and broken engagements are the thoughts and the language so well suited to one another that the writer will consent to their union. Now, Cobbett was evidently one of these people who do all their thinking before putting pen to paper, and he wished his son to follow his example. For he says to him: "Sit down to write what you have thought, and not to think what you shall write." So the old man's advice was not so bad as it seemed.

It is quite certain that the raw material of thought

must be organised at some stage or other. In the ordinary writer the process takes place in three stages: it begins in the unconscious, it continues in the conscious mind, it is completed during the revision of what has been written. It is not improbable that in the genius most of the elaboration takes place at the first stage—most, but not all. Nobody can dispense with any stage, not even the last. Plato couldn't; and the scored and amended manuscripts in the British Museum afford abundant evidence that other men of genius couldn't either. They had all learnt "the last and greatest art, the art to blot." There is this much of truth, however, in Cobbett's teaching: the more deeply you ponder your theme, and the more you turn your thoughts over in your mind and discuss them with your friends, the more easily will the words flow from your pen, and the less need will there be to amend them afterwards.

In fact the simplicity which we are called upon to admire is not always easy to achieve; it is often the result of strenuous labour. Our undigested ideas are anything but simple. The first careless thoughts that come into our heads are not at once ready for passing on to others; and that not because they are too simple, but because they are not simple enough—not clarified enough and not unified enough. They are too untidy to appear in public. We tolerate them in the privacy of our own minds, but to prepare them for company we groom them a little, and dress them properly. We search for the words that will best fit them; and this very attempt to adjust the words to the idea seems to give substance and solidity to the idea itself. Having

got the ideas clear and solid, we arrange them in logical order, because we know that that is the simplest way in which the mind can apprehend them, and after apprehending them hold them tight. This is composition. It is the composition that goes on in the head before the tongue begins to speak or the pen begins to write. And he is a wise man who knows when the composition has reached its most effective stage.

Dr. Johnson in criticising Lyttelton's *Dialogues of the Dead* makes the odd remark that they were "rather effusions than compositions." The implication seems to be that they were poured out of the author's head before they were ready. But when are they ready? What precisely does the author do when he elaborates his language (and at the same time, of course, elaborates his meaning) in order to make it presentable? Though it appears to mean complication, it really means simplification; in the sense that order is simpler than disorder. Now, it seems to me that there are two distinct ways in which this order can be brought about; one is by logical exposition and the other by grammatical complication. Let me illustrate by this passage taken from a description of Dan Leno by Mr. Wilfred Whitten:

Leno brought something upon the stage that was not in his song, or in his talk, or in any of his nameable qualities, even in his humour. None of these really distinguished him from others. It was the rush of whimsical sympathy from the little man that made him great. Who can forget that dry, pleading, coaxing, arguing voice, hoarse with its eagerness, yet mellow with sheer kindness and sweetness of character? <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *A Londoner's London*, by Wilfred Whitten (John o' London), p. 183.

Here we have the following ideas fused into four sentences:

Whimsical sympathy rushed from little Dan Leno—this made him great—this distinguished him from others—he brought it on the stage—it was not something in his song—not something in his talk—not something in any of his nameable qualities—not even something in his humour—we cannot forget his voice—it was dry—it was pleading—it was coaxing—it was arguing—it was hoarse with its eagerness—it was mellow with sheer kindness and sweetness of character.

Let us now suppose that these same ideas had occurred to one of our inveterate sentence-spinners. He would scorn the notion of spreading them among four sentences and would try to weld them all into one, in some such way as this:

Leno was in his way a great man, and was, in his presence on the stage, distinguished from others not so much by something in his song, or in his talk, or in any of his nameable qualities, or even in his humour, as by a whimsical sympathy which rushed from the little man, and which gave him that unforgettable voice of his, dry, pleading, coaxing, arguing, hoarse with its eagerness, yet mellow with sheer kindness and sweetness of character.

Here is quite a good sentence. It is grammatically coherent, and accords with the principles laid down by those who undertake to instruct us on the question of style. It is properly unified. It leaves out nothing, and puts everything in its right place. It combines, with due regard to rank—to co-ordination and subordination—the fifteen ideas (or thereabouts) which constitute the subject-matter of the original passage. The rhythm is passable. It rises towards a sort of climax, which is reached near the middle, and then sinks

slowly towards the close. And yet is there anybody who can for a moment doubt its inferiority to the original?

Johann Friedrich Herbart, of whom one heard so much thirty years ago, is now a much neglected philosopher. And yet he was the first to put forward certain principles of teaching, certain laws underlying the communication of knowledge, which have now become mere commonplaces in the world of education. His five steps of teaching (they might just as well have been called five steps of speaking or of writing) can without appreciable loss be boiled down to three: preparation, presentation, and recapitulation. If you wish to convey a message you must first prepare the mind of the audience to receive it, then you must present it, and finally you must drive it home. The popular form of the doctrine is this: if you have something important to say you should say it three times; first say that you are going to say it, then say it, and then say that you have said it.

Let us now examine Mr. Whitten's sentences in the light of these principles. His main point is that Leno's greatness consisted in his gift of whimsical sympathy; and this point he brings out clearly in his third sentence. The first two sentences prepare the mind of the reader to receive this central fact; and they do so by rejecting the most obvious explanation of Leno's greatness, and strongly raising the reader's curiosity as to the true explanation. And after the author has given the true explanation he "rubs it in" by showing the means by which the whimsical sympathy was revealed.

This easy and orderly progression of ideas is lost in the unified paraphrase. There is no clear discrimination between the three movements. The ground is less carefully prepared; the main idea, lost as it is in a maze of phrases and clauses, is far less skilfully planted; and the piece of work as a whole is less firmly consolidated by the final clause of the paraphrase than by the rhetorical question with which the original ends up. I know quite well that Hooker, or Ruskin, or Stevenson, or some other masterhand at the business of sentence-weaving would have turned out a much better web than I have done, and have given it a pattern of sound—a rhythm and a melody—which mine does not possess; but I cannot conceive any qualities, or any combination of qualities, bestowed on the one-sentence version which could render it as effective for its purpose as the four-sentence version. The qualities added would be of less value than the qualities left behind.

In looking at the question of simplicity we must not be misled by the terminology of grammar. In grammar, a sentence is simple if it contains one, and not more than one, finite verb. Yet a sentence may be grammatically simple and yet be grossly overloaded and overstrained. Here, for instance, is a simple sentence from a daily paper:

The circular letter is designed to draw attention to the difficulty of road travellers in locating their whereabouts and verifying their direction when visiting, or passing through, central and suburban areas, due to the lack of conspicuous street and name plates, notably of the principal streets at their junctions with tributary roads and streets.

Though this sentence has but one explicit predication, it has several implicit predications. Though it has but one full-blown flower, it has many others in the bud. Beneath its grammatical simplicity lurks a great deal of logical multiplicity; for all its participles and gerunds and abstract nouns might just as well have appeared as distinct logical propositions.

Words are easy to understand and easy to use not in proportion to their simplicity but in proportion to their familiarity. A short word is not necessarily more intelligible than a long word. *Pard* is a short word and *elephant* is a long one; yet it would puzzle one to find a child of five who knew the meaning of *pard*, or did not know the meaning of *elephant*. Nor does the distinction between easy and difficult correspond with the distinction between Saxon and Latin. *Comely*, for instance, is of Saxon origin, and *beautiful* is of Latin origin, yet the second word is far more readily and more widely understood than the first. In fact the distinction between the Anglo-Saxon element in English and the Latin element, interesting as it is to the scholar, has long ceased to be of any importance to the user of the language. In the commonwealth of letters the pedigree of words is of little consequence; it is their usefulness in the traffic of ideas that gives them their worth.

When, however, we turn from history to biography—when we cease to relate words to the history of the nation and relate them to the history of the individual—we touch a distinction which is of real importance. For each of us may roughly divide his vocabulary into two parts—the part acquired in childhood, and the

part acquired in later life. And it is the former that is the more intimately ours. The words and phrases that count for most with us are those we learnt in early life—at our mother's knee, in the frank intercourse of the family circle, in the free-and-easy companionship of childhood. So deeply are these rooted in our nature, so rich are they in their associations, so strongly tinged are they with feeling, that they have almost become part of ourselves. They are the words that accompany our secret thoughts, our meditations, and our day-dreams. Compared with this vital vocabulary, the vocabulary that is merely bookish or professional is cold and lifeless.

This naive vocabulary of childhood comprises the commonest words in the language—the words that are not only the earliest, but also the most frequently heard and the most frequently used. But they are not without their defects. Though they are as a rule richer in their inner meanings than the acquisitions of later years, they are often less definite and less exact in their outer reference. They often convey feeling more adequately than they convey fact. Indeed, those very qualities of warmth and intimacy which endear them to the poet, whose appeal is more to the heart than to the head, vitiate their value to the man of science, whose main aim is to present facts in the cold light of reason. They are, in truth, too ambiguous, and too apt to stir up irrelevant feelings, for the expression of exact knowledge. The result is that the scientist seems to be faced with two awkward alternatives: to use common words and be misunderstood, or to use uncommon words and not be understood at all—

except of course by the initiated few. In choosing the latter he ignores the advice of Schopenhauer: Think like a philosopher, but speak like the man in the street. And indeed the advice, taken quite literally, is impossible to carry out. New facts, new distinctions, new relationships—all require new words. And definite statements require words with clear-cut meanings. The wiser course is that of compromise. Whether in speaking or in writing, whether in poetry or in prose, whether in imaginative prose or in scientific prose, the language of the common people—the King's English—should be used for all it is worth. It is true that it needs great skill to use it for all it is worth; and that few men of science—few men of any kind—possess that skill. But that should be the aim; and where the common language fails in clearness, in dignity, or in freedom from ambiguity, it should be eked out by the language of the laboratory and of the study. Technical jargon is an evil, but a necessary evil. And necessary evils should be kept at a minimum.

Sometimes these two groups of words run parallel. For many of the words in the first group there are synonyms in the second group. And this fact has become socially serviceable. English, like every other language, has its reticences; it has words which are never uttered in polite society; and these words are almost invariably words of the first group. They are vulgar words in the good sense as well as in the bad sense. They generally refer to disagreeable things—to certain terrifying religious dogmas or to certain bodily functions which too forcibly remind us of our nearness to the beasts that perish. And when it is

necessary to mention these unpleasant things, it is kind as well as courteous to use words which will stir up the least mud. We therefore use substitutes for the forbidden words; synonyms derived from a foreign source—generally from the Latin or the French—words which are less firmly attached to the ideas and less strongly tinged with emotion. Thus for a certain class of ideas we have a dual language, one half of which is under a strong social ban. It sometimes happens that a word will change sides. In my boyhood *sweat* was a tabooed word; now it may be used at any time and in any place. It is no longer necessary to substitute *perspire*.

Swear words are drawn from the forbidden group. The normal man swears only when he is angry; for swearing is one of the ways in which he can break things. To break a convention being safer than to break heads, and cheaper than to break furniture, the angry man bursts into oaths and curses. He hurls at his victim violent words which serve the double purpose of wounding his self-respect and shocking his sense of propriety. My own young daughter at about the age of four was made very angry by somebody who thwarted one of her whims. She stamped her little foot on the floor and shouted, "Spit, bust, stomach; spit, bust, stomach; spit, bust, stomach." She was swearing. They were the wickedest words she knew. They were also most excellent explosives.

Swearing in cold blood, swearing as a social pleasure, or a decorative relief, is quite another matter. The objection to it is that it debases the currency of speech and takes the force out of real swearing. The moral of

all which is: first, don't swear unless you are angry; secondly, don't get angry.

In spite of its defects and its dangers, its bluntness and its ambiguities, this simple intimate vocabulary of childhood is the very pith and marrow of the language. It is so when a man is young; it is so when he is old. It is the garb in which his ideas are born—or, to speak more truly, it is their very bone and blood. Divest them of their native tissue, wrap them in other words, and they become cold and artificial. Worse still, they lose their sincerity. Here, for instance, is a letter written at the middle of last century by a young girl at a boarding school <sup>1</sup>:

MINSTERLEY,

*June 3rd, 1851.*

MY DEAR MAMMA,

The rapidity with which time travels onwards warns me that it now becomes my duty, as well as pleasure, to transmit you intelligence relative to the day appointed for our dispersion from this, our present habitation, to enjoy an interval of cessation from study, with our beloved home friends. Friday, the 20th inst., is the day decided for our release from school and its restrictions, and on this day (all being well) we hope to greet our beloved relatives, and in the fruition of home society and friends, experience a large quota of sublunary felicity

Misses Griffiths and Bartley desire me to present their regards and hope you will coincide with them in esteeming me generally improved.

Accept, dear Mamma, my kindest love, present the same to my brothers, sisters and all friends, and —

Believe me,

Your affectionate daughter,

RUTH EDDOWES.

<sup>1</sup> For this letter I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. H. H. Peach of Leicester, who has the original in his possession.

Whether this letter was dictated by Misses Griffiths and Bartley, or whether it was copied from a *Complete Letter Writer* I will not venture to say, but I know that no schoolgirl ever did or ever could produce such a letter out of her own head, to say nothing of her own heart. In these days, when children are allowed to write freely and naturally, the letter home (I speak from experience) is more likely to run in this strain: "Dear Old Spud, S.O S. Short of tin."<sup>1</sup>

We have now looked at literary style from several points of view, and have seen that it is never purely an index of the self, and never merely the drapery of thought, but always a compound of the two, with sometimes one of the elements predominating, and sometimes the other. The more sincere a writer is, the more prone is he to let his thoughts and feelings mould his utterance; and the more he lets his thoughts and feelings mould his utterance, the more truly is the style the man himself. Sincerity is therefore one of the essentials of a good style, and courtesy is another; the courtesy of trying to give one's audience the minimum of trouble and the maximum of profit.

<sup>1</sup> I once mentioned this at a public meeting, and at the close a member of the audience asked this question "Do you mean to say, sir, that you encourage your daughter to use slang, and to say that she is short of tin when she means that she is short of dough?"

## CHAPTER XII

### THE TYRANNY OF THE PEDANT

Give a dog a bad name and hang him.—OLD SAW.

Get wisdom, and with all thy getting get understanding.

—PROVERBS

It is said that in a cultured centre like Boston even the owls say "to whit, to whom"!—ERNEST WEEKLEY.

GIVE a word a bad name and, however innocent the poor word may be, the bad name will stick. *Reliable* is a case in point. About the middle of the nineteenth century some wiseacre took it into his head that the word *reliable* was a suspicious character of shady antecedents. Dean Alford, writing in the sixties, described the word as "hardly legitimate." "We do not," he went on to say, "*rely a man*, we *rely upon a man*; so that *reliable* does duty for *rely-upon-able*. *Trustworthy* conveys all the meaning required." Further attacks were made upon *reliable* on the ground that it was a new-comer, an upstart, and therefore low-born and vulgar. The fine old English word *trustworthy*, on the other hand, had come down to us from Anglo-Saxon times, bearing all the marks of staid respectability.

Now hear the case for the defence. If *reliable* is "scarcely legitimate" because of its structure, many other words whose rectitude has never been questioned must share its disgrace. *Laughable*, for instance, is hardly legitimate, for we do not *laugh a man*, we *laugh at a man*; so that *laughable* does duty for *laugh-at-able*.

And *dependable* is hardly legitimate, for we do not *depend a man*, we *depend upon a man*; so that *dependable* does duty for *depend-upon-able*. To these anomalies there is no end. So justice demands that if *reliable* is to be put in the dock, a large number of other dictionary words must be put there too.

As for its pedigree, its detractors have saddled the wrong horse. It is *trustworthy* that is the upstart, not *reliable*. For, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, the word *reliable* first appeared in the language in 1569, and *trustworthy* did not put in an appearance till 1808. So *reliable* was in literary use when Shakespeare was a boy, but *trustworthy* never got within the covers of a book till the great Victorians were in their cradles.

Addison fell into a similar trap when he printed in the seventy-eighth number of *The Spectator*: "The Humble Petition of WHO and WHICH." This is the plea of the petitioners: "We are descended of ancient Families, and kept up our Dignity and Honour many Years, till the Jack-sprat THAT supplanted us." The truth of the matter is, however, that the Jack-sprat *that* can boast an ancient and honourable lineage. He nobly acted his part as a relative pronoun long before the other two fellows were ever heard of. It is they who are the usurpers.

In the whole republic of letters the most flagrant case of injustice is that of which the harmless necessary *get* is the victim. Mr. A. P. Herbert writes<sup>1</sup>: "In all the long years of my school career no one, so far as I know, attempted to teach me anything about the English language. . . . But I know that somewhere, sometime,

<sup>1</sup> *Punch*, August 16th, 1933, p. 185.

some pastor or master did sternly remark to me that the popular word *get* means *acquire* or *obtain*, and that to use it with the sense of *become* or *go*, for example, was slang, slovenly and horrible. That was all the instruction I ever had in the English tongue, and it has worried me ever since. Only the other day, in the august *Observer*, a distinguished literary critic said that the Thames 'is getting cleaner.' This spoiled my Sunday."

Sporadically there appear in the press letters from correspondents who censure the *getters* and the *gotters* and plume themselves on abstaining from the use of "the ugly verb *to get*." They are either schoolmasters or persons who have caught the prejudice from schoolmasters. For if it was not born in the school it is at any rate perpetuated and disseminated by the school. Here is a sample letter: "In my youth one had to write lines for using the redundant word *got*. So strange is the force of early teaching that I never write or use the word." I have seen American textbooks in which lesson after lesson is devoted to the lofty purpose of eliminating *got*. As though the fear of *got* were the beginning of wisdom. And *got* is got from *get*. So the fear of *get* and *got* has got into the blood and bones of the English-speaking people, and it needs a certain sturdy independence and a strong sense of the force and fitness of words to use these two suspects freely and frankly in the teeth of the universal prejudice. Timid writers who let these words slip inadvertently from their pens immediately erase them and substitute some feeble inanity which they think would please a pedant. "This is a splendidly sane and useful book," writes a reviewer, "and every woman embarking on the career

of motherhood would be wise to possess herself of a copy." One can almost see the reviewer's script with *get* crossed out, and *possess herself of* written above. With all thy getting get away from *get*.

*Get* is reputed to be an ugly word, and the father of an ugly brood: *got*, *gat*, *getting*, and *gotten*. Are these words really ugly? Are any words really ugly?—intrinsically I mean. They may of course be adventitiously ugly, ugly through being associated with difficulties of articulation. In that incidental sense *statistics* and *tachistoscope* and *pedagogy* are ugly words. One dislikes them for the reason that the schoolboy gave for disliking drill: he said it made his throat ache. But *get* is not ugly in any sense whatever. It slips from the tongue as neatly as any word in the language. Its first consonant has all the crispness of *k*, which D'Arcy Thompson has called the king of the consonants; its final consonant can easily be sounded even by the dentally defective; and the intervening vowel is the commonest in the English tongue. There's nothing wrong with *get*. Wipe off the mud with which he has been spattered and he is as fair and comely a little fellow as ever stepped.

The other members of the family are, apart from prejudice, just as prepossessing. One of the handsomest of them—*gotten*—is now an exile across the water, and we have lost our only dissyllable which rhymes with *rotten* except *cotton*—unless we count *shotten*, which is, saving your grace, a scurvy word.

This strange antipathy to the verb *get* is not of modern origin; it dates back to the days of Cromwell at least; but not to the Elizabethans. They had no trace

of it. Ben Jonson's "Get money; still get money, boy; no matter by what means" is typical of the usage of the period. Shakespeare had a fondness for the word, and so had the translators of the Authorised Version of the Scriptures. Jespersen, in his *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, has this interesting note on the verb <sup>1</sup>:

*Gat* is the only form of this verb admitted by some modern poets, who avoid *get* and *got* altogether. Shakespeare uses the verb hundreds of times. In the Authorised Version *get* is pretty frequent, but *got* is avoided in the New Testament, while it is found 7 times in the Old Testament (in five of these places the revisers of 1881 substituted other words: gathered, bought, come), *gat* is used 20 times, all of them in the O.T. (three of these were changed in 1881); *gotten* is found 23 times in the O.T. and twice in the N.T. (five of these, among them both the instances in the N.T., were changed in 1881). Milton makes a very sparing use of the verb (which he inflects *get got got*, never *gat* in the past or *gotten* in the participle), all the forms of the verb only occur 19 times in his poetical works, while, for instance, *give* occurs 168 times and *receive* 73 times. The verb is rare in Pope too. Why is this verb tabooed in this way?

Why, indeed? It is the poets, you will note, who aim at renouncing the word and all its ways. The prose writers, whatever their individual tastes may be, find they cannot get along without it. In the pages of those who write terse idiomatic English it crops up with amazing frequency. For it is a word of long descent and has, in the course of ages, gathered round it a crowd of attendant particles, each of which helps it to perform a distinct and separate task. We can thus *get on*, or *get up*, or *get away* . . . but why should I con-

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 226-7, f.n.

tinue this list when Dr. Brewer, in his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*,<sup>1</sup> achieves the same purpose in this curious and interesting passage?

"I got on horseback within ten minutes after I got your letter. When I got to Canterbury I got a chaise for town, but I got wet through, and have got such a cold that I shall not get rid of in a hurry. I got to the Treasury about noon, but first of all got shaved and dressed. I soon got into the secret of getting a memorial before the Board, but I could not get an answer then; however, I got intelligence from a messenger that I should get one next morning. As soon as I got back to my inn, I got my supper, and then got to bed. When I got up next morning, I got my breakfast, and, having got dressed, I got out in time to get an answer to my memorial. As soon as I got it, I got into a chaise, and got back to Canterbury by three, and got home to tea. I have got nothing for you, and so adieu."

Mr. C. K. Ogden has, as we have already shown, devised a system of Basic English in which the vocabulary is reduced to a minimum. It is primarily intended for the use of foreigners, who naturally wish to learn English, if they have to learn it, with the least possible trouble. So Mr. Ogden has provided them with a potted English, a concentrated extract of English. He claims that his list includes all the essential English words—all the words necessary to convey the ordinary work-a-day ideas—and it is a list that runs to no more than 850 words. As I have said before, the whole boodle can be written on the back of a sheet of note-paper. So the cutting-down must have been pretty drastic; especially among the verbs, for there are only

<sup>1</sup> The passage is also quoted by Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith in *Words and Idioms*, pp. 256-7.

eighteen of them left. And among the eighteen appears the verb *get*.

It is not, however, the word *get* that the purists mostly scorn, nor yet the word *got*; but the word *got* used as a superfluous participle. Hear, however, what Johnson says about it in his Dictionary:

*To get*, in all its significations, both active and neutral, implies the acquisition of something, or the arrival at some state or place by some means, except in the use of the preterite compound, which often implies mere possession. as, *he has got a good estate* does not always mean that he has acquired, but barely that he possesses it. So we say *the lady has got black eyes*, merely meaning that she has them.

It is clear, therefore, that *to have got* was used in the sense *to have* or *to possess* even in Johnson's day; and that he gave the usage his approval. How far back can we trace the idiom? The *Century Dictionary* quotes "Thou has got the face of a man" from George Herbert, and George Herbert's life overlapped Shakespeare's. Shakespeare himself uses *hath got* with surprising frequency; but it is rarely possible to decide for certain whether it means *hath acquired* or *possesseth*. When Salisbury says, "We have not got that which we have," he seems to be playing on the double meaning of *have got*.<sup>1</sup> And it is pretty certain that Old Gobbo in speaking to his son uses the compound term in the sense of the simple term *to have*: "What a beard hast thou got! thou hast got more hair on thy chin than Dobbin my phill-horse has on his tail."<sup>2</sup>

Present-day usage is well illustrated in the following

<sup>1</sup> *Henry VI*, Part 2, Act V, Scene 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Merchant of Venice*, Act II, Scene 2.

passage from Dr. L. P. Jacks's *Education through Recreation*:

The situation seems to be this: we have got democracy; we have got agreement that democracy must be educated; we have got universal education; but the kind of education we have got, though not without its merits, is not the kind of education democracy requires.

Another use of *got*, also alleged to be pleonastic, appears in such a sentence as "You've got to do as you are told." *Got* is followed by the infinitive and indicates obligation or necessity. "What has the general public got to do with literature?" asks Augustine Birrell in *Obiter Dicta*.

The indictment of all these instances is that the participle *got* may be omitted without injury to the sense, and that *got* is therefore superfluous. But is it superfluous? Is *Have you your driving licence?* as strong a question as *Have you got your driving licence?* And is *You have to do as you are told* as emphatic a statement as *You've got to do as you are told*. Try it on a refractory boy and see. Jespersen has put his finger on the real reason for using *got* in addition to *have*. "The reason," he says, "obviously is that on account of its frequent use as an auxiliary, *have* was not felt to be strong enough to carry the meaning of 'possess' and therefore had to be reinforced."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Logan Pearsall Smith gives a similar explanation: "The verb *have*, being used as an auxiliary, has lost whatever kinæsthetic associations it originally possessed; and since it now describes a static, or merely grammatical relation, *got*, from the

<sup>1</sup> *Essentials of English Grammar*, p. 242.

dynamic verb *get*, has been added to it, to give it the vividness which comes from the idea of action, in however vague a form.”<sup>1</sup> In fact *have* is salt that has lost its savour, and the addition of *get* brings the savour back.

Fowler dismisses the question in a sentence: “*Have got* for *possess* or *have* is good colloquial but not good literary English.”<sup>2</sup> I should like to know how long an idiom has to be used as good colloquial English before it becomes good literary English. I should also like to know how many classical authors must use it in their writings before it is recognised as good English prose. It was in use in the days of Elizabeth, and probably long before. It has been employed by Shakespeare, Swift, Johnson, Thackeray, Ruskin, and by a host of modern writers. I therefore put forward a strong plea for the admission of this particular use of the verb *to get* to the full franchise of the English tongue.

It will be seen that the verb *to get* got into disrepute through acting the Good Samaritan to the verb *to have*. That those who happen to disapprove this service should visit their displeasure on all the other uses of the verb seems to me as illogical as it is ungracious.

Another bogey of the schoolroom is the word *only*, which has an irritating trick of getting into the wrong part of the sentence. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it: “*Only* was formerly often placed away from the word or words which it limited; this is still frequent in speech where the stress and pauses prevent

<sup>1</sup> *Words and Idioms*, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> *Modern English Usage*, p. 216.

ambiguity, but is now avoided by perspicuous writers." That it was formerly misplaced will readily be admitted. Shakespeare wrote, "I think he only loves the world for him"; and he makes Portia vow "To live in prayer and contemplation, Only attended by Nerissa here." Ben Jonson's line "Drink to me only with thine eyes" would have been as open to objection, if it had been in prose, as was the old postcard heading: "The address only to be written on this side." Here is a passage from Margaret Macaulay's diary with the *only* rightly placed in the prose and wrongly placed in the verse—wrongly, that is, from the logical point of view only.

Some one mentioned an acquaintance who had gone to the West Indies, hoping to make money, but had only ruined the complexions of his daughters. Tom said—

Mr. Walker was sent to Berbice  
By the greatest of statesmen and earls.  
He went to bring back yellow boys,  
But he only brought back yellow girls.

Henry James wrote: "I can only work in my own way."

Other prose writers of the past have been equally indifferent to the position of *only*. Is it not true that prose writers of the present are almost equally indifferent? Let me quote a few.

POPULAR WRITERS: Mrs. Pleat only saw him on Tuesdays.—*Beverley Nichols*.

Carson's circuit only numbered forty members.—*Edward Majoribanks*.

The lines, as originally written were:—

Which was the face that launched a thousand ships—

Sir Oswald Mosley? Or Sir Stafford Cripps?

I only made them up a month or two back.—*Ronald Knox.*

GRAMMARIANS In this book we are only dealing with English Grammar—*Prof. H. C. Wyld.*

*Who* is always a noun-pronoun and can only be used in reference to persons—*Prof. H. C. Wyld.*

All forms of the verb only occur 19 times in his poetical works—*Otto Jespersen.*

CRITICS. I only pretend to know as much about versifying as my carpenter knows about woodwork—*T. S. Eliot.*

I ascended the platform of these lectures only in the rôle of a moralist—*T. S. Eliot.*

It would only do so if we were prepared to admit that only our conscious activities matter—*I. A. Richards.*

We are often compelled to say things about the poem which are only true of the effects of the poem—*I. A. Richards.*

Such statements could only come from someone quite familiar with the notion that plot can have any powerful significance at all.—*E. M. W. Tillyard.*

Large ideas could only be put concretely—*E. M. W. Tillyard.*

Perhaps that courage only comes when one knows to what extent ignorance is almost universal—*Ezra Pound.*

Fish can only be observed in their natural conditions with the greatest difficulty—*Basel de Selincourt.*

As a matter of fact, however, *who* has been trying to devour *whom* for centuries and has only been prevented from swallowing it up completely by misguided grammarians—*Dr. J. R. T. Greig.*

An examination of these passages will show that in every instance *only* appears too early in the sentence. It is anticipatory. It warns the reader that some area of meaning has to be restricted; and it does so sooner than is necessary. So soon, in fact, that a stickler for the letter of the statement would contend that it restricts the wrong area. When Mr. T. S. Eliot says,

"I only pretend to know as much about versifying as my carpenter knows about woodwork," he does not mean that he is only pretending; nor yet that he pretends only to know and not to feel. What he means is that he pretends to know only as much and no more. The *only*, in spite of its position, limits the meaning of *as much*. And I am willing to admit that the sentence, and indeed all the other sentences quoted, would in some respects be improved by shifting *only* so that it stood next to its logical associate. But I do not think that it is always all gain and no loss.

What is the reason for the frequent displacement of *only*? All we can say is that it is a habit of English speech to put *only* as early in the sentence as possible; just as it is the habit to put the adjective in front of the noun, instead of letting it trail in the rear as in French. The pull towards the front of the verbal procession brings *only* further forward than is logically justifiable. *I only wish I could*, for instance, should logically be *I wish I only could*. Now the question arises: Should we sacrifice logic and write the former, or should we sacrifice naturalness and write the latter? By *naturalness* I mean ease and smoothness of utterance due to having heard and spoken the words over and over again in that precise order. We have said, *I only wish I could* so many times that the words run in a smooth channel. We have probably neither heard nor spoken the words, *I wish I only could*. They accordingly seem stiff, jerky, and unnatural.

Dean Alford, in discussing the position of *only*, remarks, "Very often we cannot have exactness and smoothness together. Wherever this is the case, the harsher

method of constructing the sentence is, in colloquial English, abandoned, even at the risk of exactness and school rules. The adverb *only* in many sentences where, strictly speaking, it ought to follow its verb and limit the objects of the verb is in good English placed before the verb." I have elsewhere,<sup>1</sup> given arguments in support of Dean Alford's view, arguments which are criticised by John O'London,<sup>2</sup> who believes that a sentence is always weakened by separating *only* from the word or words which it properly qualifies.

The question really resolves itself into a choice between two competing alternatives. When placing *only* in a sentence we cannot always get both logic and smoothness; we must sacrifice one of them. Which is it to be? Personally I am inclined to side with the people and sacrifice logic. For if we are to purge the language of its illogicalities, there is no end to the business. We must stop saying *head over heels* when we mean *heels over head*; we must no longer say *bred and born*, for one is born first and bred after; and we must never use *Now then* as an expostulation, for if it's *now* it can't be *then*, and if it's *then* it can't be *now*. And yet I don't feel quite comfortable in my mind about it. For mere custom can change harshness into smoothness, but no amount of custom can turn the illogical into the logical. The characters in Jane Austen's novels all say *Is not he?*<sup>3</sup> where we should now say *Is he not?* And I have no doubt that the expression *Is he not?* would have sounded as stiff and stilted to Jane's

<sup>1</sup> *Teaching the Mother Tongue*, pp. 148-9.

<sup>2</sup> *Is it Good English?*, pp. 89-91.

<sup>3</sup> This survives in modern English in the form *Isn't he?*

ear as the other expression does to ours. Practical wisdom seems to point towards the use of the logical form wherever it is possible without doing violence to the usage of common speech. Or, better still, let us take Mr. Fowler's advice and stick to the natural order except where perspicuity is in danger.<sup>1</sup>

The schoolmaster, however, is less prone to invent spurious solecisms than is the examiner. The examiner loves the game. For does it not feed his resources? Does it not give him new types of questions to be corrected? He has been known, for instance, to submit for correction: *The syllabus includes a play of Shakespeare's*. The candidate is supposed to change the last word to *Shakespeare*, on the ground that a double genitive has been used. Is there then no distinction between *a play of Shakespeare*, such as Clemence Dane has written, and *a play of Shakespeare's*—a play which Shakespeare himself wrote? And must we say *a caricature of Max Beerbohm* when we mean *a caricature of Max Beerbohm's*? And must we, in avoidance of the double genitive, change *a friend of mine*, into *a friend of me*?

Many an examiner would condemn the use of *we*, *you*, and *they* in an indefinite or impersonal sense, and would have us use *one* instead. He thinks *One does not usually take one's dog with one to church, does one?* is more correct than *You don't usually take your dog to church with you, do you?* There is no doubt as to which is the more offensive.

He who would impose useless restrictions upon the language is no friend of the language. He reduces its

<sup>1</sup> See *Modern English Usage* under *Only*.

flexibility without increasing its precision. To limit the application of *either* and *neither* to two alternatives is a case in point. If to say *Either A or B or C* be an offence, it is an offence which our greatest writers have committed, and which any writer of spirit would wilfully and deliberately commit. One restriction which I myself find particularly irritating is the embargo placed on the free use of *less* as the opposite of *more*. Though we may say *More than a hundred people were present*, we may not say *Less than a hundred people were present*. We must say *Fewer than a hundred people were present*; for it is maintained that *less* refers to quantity only; it cannot refer to number. Are we then forbidden to say *Four is less than six*, and recommended to say *Four is fewer than six*? Such pedantry drives people into saying *The number of persons on board was fewer than usual*; which Mr. Fowler stigmatises as itself a solecism. One should treat all these bogies as men of mettle have always treated that bug-a-boo the split infinitive. In the early part of *The Path to Rome* Mr. Hilaire Belloc warned us that he was going to split his infinitives "from helm to saddle"; and quite recently Dr Greig has given us this wholesome piece of advice: "In kindness to these spectre-ridden boobs [i.e. those who fear the split infinitive] I would urge all writers for some years to regularly and without compunction split every infinitive that comes their way—even in letters to *The Times*."<sup>1</sup>

There is one real solecism which is so common and yet so evasive that Professor Ernest Weekley has called our special attention to it and has dubbed it the "*One*

<sup>1</sup> *Breaking Priscian's Head*, p. 62.

of . . . complex.”<sup>1</sup> It afflicts not only the semi-literate, but also the learned and the cultured. A distinguished headmaster recently discussed in a daily paper “One of the most delicate and perplexing questions that has ever bewildered an unreflecting public.” A moment’s reflection will enable the reader to see that the *has* should have been *have*. The wrong use of the singular is perhaps more obvious in the simpler sentence: *I am one of those people who never dreams*. Mr. Belloc has this sentence: “I have much pleasure in laying before the student one of the best examples that has ever appeared in the weekly press of how a careful, subtle, just, and yet tender review, may be written.”<sup>2</sup> But then Mr. Belloc was writing at Dr. Caliban, and that was the sort of English that Dr. Caliban would write.

John O’London has pointed out the interesting fact that in the Authorised Version of the Bible the singular is often used where the rules of grammar would require the plural. “For thine *is* the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.” “And now *abideth* faith, hope, charity, these three.” It will be observed that in these instances the verb precedes the subject; but there are other instances where it does not. For example, “Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust *doth* corrupt.” In the line “The tumult and the shouting dies” Kipling has borrowed scriptural grammar as well as scriptural words. Shakespeare too favours the singular: “Time and the hour *runs* through the roughest day.” “There

<sup>1</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Caliban’s Guide to Letters*, p. 26.

is tears, for his love; joy, for his fortune; honour, for his valour; and death for his ambition"—a pretty big burden for *is* to carry. But then the singular has greater strength than the plural. That, at any rate, is the contention of John O' London. And there let us leave it.

## CHAPTER XIII

### PUNCTUATION

Too many stops stop the way.—W. S. LANDOR.

An experienced writer means a point as definitely as he means a word —ARLO BATES.

Reading is thinking with someone else's head instead of one's own.—ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER. .

So accustomed are we to see every piece of printed matter well and truly punctuated that we forget that it was not always so; we forget that it was not till the close of the sixteenth century that punctuation was invented, and the art of expression acquired a resource unknown to the ancients. For the ancients knew nothing of punctuation proper. They had no points; they had only spaces. They could leave a blank on paper to represent a change in thought or a pause in speech. They could begin a new line of writing when they began a new line of thinking; they could arrange a poem in a pattern which appealed to the eye in the same way as the sound appealed to the ear. But they had no pointing—no real punctuation. In the oldest manuscripts of all there was no separation of word from word, no separation of sentence from sentence. The reader had to make his own groupings, and find his own stopping-places.

Only gradually did words come to be marked off by spaces; only gradually did sentences, clauses, and phrases come to be marked off by stops. Our present

system of punctuation was invented by the early printers, most notable of whom was Aldus Manutius, who set up a press in Venice in 1490. The purpose of the invention was to make reading easier—to make it as easy as listening; the points doing for the reader what the pauses and modulations of the living voice do for the listener. So punctuation is the translation of one kind of language into another kind of language.

Points are intended to give information beyond what the bare words give. Sometimes the information is not additional but merely confirmatory. For instance, in *You are a lawyer?* the mark of interrogation tells us something more than the mere order of the words do; in *Are you a lawyer?* it does not, but it assures me that I am right in thinking that a question is being asked.

Among the purposes which points were designed to serve, that of indicating pauses is perhaps the primary one. That is why a punctuation point is called a stop, and a period a full stop. And as the only way in which pauses can be classified is by their lengths, different stops are used to indicate different lengths. They form a pausal series. Arranged in ascending order of magnitude, they are: comma, semicolon, colon, and period. If the comma is regarded as a one-beat stop, then the semicolon is a two-beat stop, the colon a three-beat stop, and the period a four-beat stop. That was the original pausal scheme, and that is the scheme presented in the grammar books of to-day. As a matter of fact, however, the colon has now dropped out of the procession and has been told off to do odd jobs; so that now the pausal series has but three

ordinary members: the comma, the semicolon, and the full stop.

It must be borne in mind, however, that punctuation was developed by Renaissance printers, and Renaissance printers were mainly concerned with presenting in a good readable form the Greek and Latin classics. And as all the early Aldine books were Greek, a language which was read but not heard, the aim of the printer was not so much to indicate rhetorical pauses as to bring out the grammatical structure. So punctuation became a matter of grouping rather than a matter of stopping. It is significant that the names of the points did not at first mean stopping-places, but certain lengths of discourse. The period, for instance, derives from the Greek *περίοδος*, a going round, a circuit, a lap in a race, a cycle of years. It meant the sentence, not the full stop. We still, in fact, use it in that sense and talk about a writer's long and rolling periods. Then again colon (*κῶλον*) meant a limb, or a length. We have a length of tubing inside us which goes by the same name. While a colon meant the limb of a sentence, the semicolon meant a half-sized limb, and the comma (from *κόπτειν*) meant a bit clipped off.

There are thus two distinct principles of punctuation, one the pausal, and the other the structural; or, if you prefer it, one the rhetorical and the other the grammatical. The rhetorical aspect seems to have been the more prominent in early days, especially in the recording of living languages, and more especially still in the transcription of plays. Shakespeare's own punctuation was almost wholly rhetorical; it was a

scheme of first-aid to the actor. At the present day, however, the rhetorical function has so far been overruled by the grammatical function, that we find Mr. Arthur Burrell giving us this advice on reading aloud: "The golden rule is this: it is purposely put, as all rules should be, in an exaggerated form—*Pay no attention to commas, semicolons, or full stops, but pause whenever you see a picture.*"<sup>1</sup>

In reading what grammarians have to say on the subject of punctuation one is at once struck by the absence of guiding principles. Rules are given which have been copied from some previous writer, who himself copied them from a still earlier writer—rules which have been flagrantly violated by the best authors for the last hundred years. Here is one, for example: "A comma is used to indicate an ellipsis; i.e., the omission of some necessary word or words: *He will go to France; and I, to Italy.*" As a matter of fact, most people would write *He will go to France, and I to Italy*; and they would be justified by abundant precedent. Even the Bible has *God is in heaven, and thou upon earth*; and not *God is in heaven, and thou, upon earth*.

Let me therefore suggest to the instructor (whether a teacher or the writer of a book) a way in which the problem of punctuation may reasonably and profitably be approached—a way in which the student is given a few guiding principles and is shown the limits within which he is free to express his personal tastes. For it is clear that punctuation is partly a matter of taste, partly a matter of fashion, and partly a matter of fixed logical principles. There are certain things which a

<sup>1</sup> *Clear Speaking and Good Reading*, p. 73.

punctuator *must* do; there are other things which he may or may not do, just as he pleases. Therefore the scheme here presented is both rigid and elastic. It is certainly not a set of dogmatic rules, nor a complete and comprehensive system; but a mere framework within which a good teacher may work out a systematic course of study. He may think it necessary even to change the framework, if he finds it will not support the actual practice of the writers of to-day.

Let us begin by looking at language as an articulated structure—a structure with joints—and by observing that the stops come at the joints. The basic unit of the structure is, as I have already tried to show, a predication. And a predication deserves the full franchise of the sentence. It has the right to be buttressed fore and aft with full stops. Let us take them as our first rule—even though it is a rule to be broken almost as soon as made—that simple predications, with no connective tags, should be separated from one another by full stops. Here are a few examples of consecutive predications:

A constitutional acuteness to this class of suffering may in part account for this. The animal tribe in particular he taketh under his especial protection. A broken-winded or spur-galled horse is sure to find an advocate in him. An over-loaded ass is his client for ever —*Charles Lamb*

But Clive was not a man to do any thing by halves. We almost blush to write it. He forged Admiral Watson's name. All was now ready for action. Mr. Watts fled secretly from Moorshedabad —*Lord Macaulay*.

He denied everything except the ownership of the watch. She besought him for his Soul's sake to speak the truth. He denied afresh, with two bad words.—*Rudyard Kipling*.

You cannot have good matter with bad style. Examine the point more closely. A man wishes to convey a fine idea to you. He employs a form of words. That form of words is his style.—*Arnold Bennett.*

Having shown how the rule is observed, I will now show how it is broken. Look at these alternatives:

I came I saw I conquered.  
I came, I saw, I conquered.  
I came, I saw; I conquered.  
I came. I saw. I conquered.

The last, which alone follows the rule, is perhaps the only one of the four which would not pass muster. It is true that the example has certain peculiarities which justify a special punctuation. It is a triad; the sentences are short; each sentence has the same subject. The sentence I have just written is also a triad, and the sentences are short; but the subjects are different. In fact, the farther we get from the three characteristics of the above example the more necessary it is to use a heavy pointing—to use semicolons or full stops.

It is a curious fact that we cannot take such liberties with two unattached predications as we can with three. With two the pointing should be heavy, if we are to avoid the appearance of illiteracy. Note the following examples:

He will not be found; he must be made.—*Lowes Dickinson.*

All order was destroyed; all business was suspended.—*Macaulay.*

The age of patronage had passed away. The age of general curiosity and intelligence had not arrived.—*Macaulay.*

The safest rule for the student to follow is this: detached predications—predications with no con-

nective tissue—should be separated from one another by full stops. If, however, the predications form a sort of natural sequence, and the connection between them, though unexpressed, is readily grasped by the reader, then the separating stop may be a semicolon. It should not be a comma. Note these five alternatives:

- i. I could not come to see you yesterday as I had a bad cold.
- ii. I could not come to see you yesterday, as I had a bad cold.
- iii. I could not come to see you yesterday, I had a bad cold.
- iv. I could not come to see you yesterday; I had a bad cold.
- v. I could not come to see you yesterday. I had a bad cold.

I contend that the only one that is wrong is No. iii. I also contend that No. iv is better than No. v.

Here are some examples of bad punctuation by modern writers:

If I draw one [a cheque] for a million it is a joke, a hoax, it has no value. (The last comma is wrong)

Spoken language is noise divided up into a system of grunts, hisses, etc., they call it "articulate" speech. (Last comma wrong.)

After all, they think, he wasn't a bad fellow, it wasn't his fault. (Last comma wrong.)

The house would please her, she would enjoy messing about with the decoration, she was very artistic. (Both commas wrong.)

So much for predications which have no grammatical connectives. When there are grammatical connectives the rule given above does not apply.

Far and away the commonest connective is *and*, and it is one of the most difficult to punctuate. Let me illustrate by a concrete example the way in which it

seems to me to be punctuated by modern writers. We will suppose that my friend John lives in a house by himself. He keeps no servants. If I call to see him the natural thing will be for him to open the door himself. So I write:

I rang the bell and John came to the door.

But if John were a wealthy and pompous person with flunkeys about, I should be slightly surprised if he came to the door. So I write:

I rang the bell, and John came to the door.

Now suppose John wrote to me saying that he was leaving home the following morning for a week's visit to the Continent, and asking me to call during that week to see that his wife and family were all right. When I called, this happened:

I rang the bell, and John came to the door.

Let us further suppose that I had received a telegram to say that John was dead. If the incident at the door remained the same, my astonishment could be expressed in this way only:

I rang the bell. And John came to the door.

This emotional use of stops before *and* is frequent in modern writings, and by no means rare in older writings. But this is not the whole of the matter. The stop that should precede *and* is often determined by the natural affinity of the sentence it introduces; it

depends upon whether the sentence is more strongly attracted to the part in front or the part behind.

Then again *and* is often a mere introductory word, just as *there* is a mere introductory word. It has no adhesive force, unless it be to connect what is coming with the sum of human experience. Charles Richet, for instance, begins his book on *The Impotence of Man* with *and*. "And to begin with," he says, "there is gravity"—gravity which pulls a man down to the planet and keeps him prisoner there.

It will be seen therefore that *and* may be preceded by any one of the series of pausal stops. The same is true of the other common co-ordinating conjunctions: *but*, *or*, and *nor*. *But*, which comes next to *and* in importance, differs slightly from it in requiring somewhat heavier stopping. It is rare to find *but* preceded by no stop at all. Here are examples illustrating these statements:

Naaman was a mighty man in valour, *but* he was a leper —  
*The Bible.*

Before marriage Lady Mary had charmed Mr. Montagu, *but* she had also frightened him, after marriage she frightened, *but* did not charm him —*Walter Bagehot.*

There are those who, with Bacon, consider love a variety of insanity; *but* it is more often merely a form of misunderstanding.  
—*Israel Zangwill*

The Sadducees did not believe in spirits. *But* the Publicans did.—*Boy* (in an examination paper).

The lady who dies a chemical yellow,  
*Or* stains her grey hair puce, etc.—*W. S. Gilbert.*

Long years have elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering. *Or*, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind because . . . —*E. A. Poe.*

She never made a revoke, *nor* ever passed it over in her adversary without exacting the utmost forfeiture.—*Charles Lamb.*

*For*, which means *and the reason is*, may be regarded as the explaining co-ordinator. It differs from the previous four in requiring some sort of stop in front of it to prevent confusion with the preposition *for*. Note these examples:

Come, children, let us shut up our box and our puppets, *for* the play is played out.—*W. M. Thackeray*.

When a man is tired of London he is tired of life; *for* there is in London all that life can afford —*Samuel Johnson*.

When new supplies became necessary, the first person that had the felicity to fall in with him, friend or stranger, was sure to contribute to the deficiency. *For* Bigod had an undeniable way with him.—*Charles Lamb*.

We now come to a special group of co-ordinators generally called conjunctive adverbs. The grammarian regards a conjunctive adverb as one that modifies the whole of the sentence in which it occurs, and that links it up with the preceding clause or sentence. *So* is perhaps the commonest conjunctive adverb. It is certainly the commonest with children. As a rule it means *and the consequence is*. Other conjunctive adverbs are *then, also, yet, still, moreover, however, therefore*. The punctuative peculiarity of these words is that they are not, except in careless informal writing, preceded by a stop lighter than a semicolon. It is true that one sometimes finds such a sentence as this: *Nobody is going to hurt you, so don't be frightened*; but it is better punctuated thus: *Nobody is going to hurt you; so don't be frightened*. Here are examples:

Philosophy is said to console a man under disappointment, although Shakespeare asserts that it is no remedy for toothache; *so* Mr. Easy turned philosopher.—*Captain Marryat*.

I cannot dance with you, fair maidens; for I must do the errand of the Immortals. So tell me the way to the Gorgon, lest I wander and perish in the waves —*Charles Kingsley*.

He sobbed and he sighed, and a gurgle he gave;

Then he threw himself into the billowy wave —*W. S. Gilbert*.

We must not have King Midas represented as an example of success; he was a failure of an unusually painful kind. Also, he had the ears of an ass. Also (like most other prominent and wealthy persons) he endeavoured to conceal the fact —*G. K. Chesterton*.

God is in heaven, and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few.—*Ecclesiastes*.

The reader is now ready to understand the following table which presents at a glance the whole punctuative scheme which I have been trying to expound. The antecedent or attendant stops are indicated in the table by the four marks o , ; . The first of these marks is an arbitrary sign for no stop at all.

#### I. CO-ORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

- i. The common co-ordinators. AND, BUT, or,  
nor . . . . . o , ; .
- ii. The explaining co-ordinator. FOR . . . . . , ,
- iii. The conjunctive adverbs: SO, THEN, also,  
yet, still, moreover, however, therefore . . . . . ; .

#### II. SUBORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS

- i. The common subordinators: AS, THAT, IF,  
because, before, until, lest, so that . . . . . o ,
- ii. Relatives: (a) pronouns. WHO, WHICH,  
THAT, what . . . . . o ,  
(b) adverbs: WHEN, where, while,  
why, how . . . . . o ,

The words in capitals are those which are most frequently used by beginners, and which need to be separately dealt with by the teacher.

So far we have dealt in detail with co-ordinating conjunctions only—conjunctions which join clauses or sentences of the same rank. Every one of them may introduce the clause of a sentence, or may even introduce a fresh sentence. The other large division—the subordinating conjunction—can introduce clauses only; and a subordinate clause cannot be separated by a full stop, or even by a semicolon, from the main clause to which it is logically related. Subordinating conjunctions, therefore, take either no stop at all, or simply a comma.

The scheme for subordinating conjunctions, simple as it is, has a complicating factor which is exemplified in the following alternatives:

I shall fall on my face (,) if I tread on my lace.  
If I tread on my lace (,) I shall fall on my face.

The comma may in either case be inserted or omitted. The second form of the sentence has this peculiarity: the joining word is not at the joint. The stop is there, however. The same alternative constructions are possible with nearly all the common subordinators; so the punctuation marks indicated for them in the above table do not necessarily precede the conjunctions.

Examples of the use of the common subordinators:

*If pessimism is true, it differs from all other truths by its uselessness.—Prof. Muirhead.*

*While Mr. Easy talked philosophy, Mrs. Easy played patience.—Captain Marryat.*

*It is already known to me that one horse can run faster than another.—Shah of Persia [who refused to see the Derby].*

## Examples showing the punctuation of relatives:

The human species, according to the best theory I can form of it, is composed of two distinct races, the men *who* borrow, and the men *who* lend.—*Charles Lamb*.

The town council provided a band, *which* played mainly intervals.—*Israel Zangwill*.

It might have been fairly said that Waterloo was won on the village green, *where* clumsy boys played very clumsy cricket.—*G. K. Chesterton*.

I do not, as I have already said, pretend that the scheme I have roughly indicated is complete. It leaves out a number of very useful marks, such as the dash and the colon; and it does not touch the punctuation of words and phrases. Nor do I pretend that there is anything authoritative or normative about the scheme. It simply affords a guide which will prevent the beginner from going far astray.

Further help can be afforded by showing how parenthetical matter should be punctuated. By parenthetical matter I mean a word or group of words which is so loosely connected with the sentence that it can be removed without serious injury to the sentence. Such words may not be marked off at all, or may be marked off by commas, by dashes, or by brackets (round or square). Here are examples, with the parenthetical parts printed in italics:

The person who *he thinks* is guilty is probably innocent.

The water in the sea, *geologists tell us*, has not been changed for fifty million years.

I have heard that the Chinese language has a word which has three different meanings—at least *they seem different to me*—a towel, a comb, and a woman.

A good part he drank away (*for he was an excellent toss-pot*), some he gave away, the rest he threw away.

Napoleon said that without him [*Rousseau*] the French Revolution would not have occurred.

It should be observed that the full stop at the end of a sentence (or the end of the previous sentence) may put one of the pair of parenthetical commas or dashes out of action; e.g.:

We must, *as the saying goes*, eat the crust as well as the crumb.

*As the saying goes*, we must eat the crust as well as the crumb.

We must eat the crust as well as the crumb, *as the saying goes*.

Some relative clauses are parenthetical and some are not. Those which are should be marked off by commas (if not by dashes or brackets); those which are not should not be marked off at all. Compare these two sentences:

Aristotle, *who was accounted a very wise man*, wrongly thought that a big stone falls faster than a little one.

The man who steals my purse will be disappointed when he looks inside.

Take the *who* clause from the first and it still remains a sensible sentence; take the *who* clause from the second and it doesn't. This is an important distinction, for the presence or absence of a comma may make a great difference in the meaning. Look at these two examples:

The mistress reprimanded the maid who was impudent.

The mistress reprimanded the maid, who was impudent.

The first suggests that the mistress had several maids, the second that she had only one. The first suggests that the impudence came first, the other that the reprimand came first. The first *who* clause is really

subordinate and adjectival, for the sentence is equivalent to *The mistress reprimanded the impudent maid*; and an adjective should never, unless it is unavoidable, be separated from its noun by a punctuation mark. In the second sentence, however, the *who* is equivalent to *and she*, and the second clause of the sentence may be regarded as co-ordinate with the first. The *who* clause does not limit; it gives additional information.

The following sentence recently appeared in *The Observer*:

I have listened to sermons, the only effect of which was to make me want to go out and break all ten commandments one after the other.

The presence of the comma suggests that all sermons had that effect upon the writer; its omission would make it clear that only some sermons had that effect.

Note how much more complimentary to the Chinese one of these statements is than the other:

The agreement will be observed by the Chinese who are honest.  
The agreement will be observed by the Chinese, who are honest.

The co-ordinating, as distinct from the subordinating, force of the relative pronoun gives it the right to begin a sentence. Not only do we find Latin sentences leading off with *qui*, *quod*, or *quæ*, but even at the present day we find so punctilious a writer as Aldous Huxley introducing a simple sentence with *which*. E.g. "We make a radical distinction between the comic and the serious style. Which is a great mistake."

When a sentence apparently simple is introduced by a subordinator it is not a simple sentence at all, but a

complex sentence with the main clause suppressed. It is a case of ellipsis. The boy who wrote, "I shouldn't like to have been born in Paris. Because I don't know a word of French" was less at fault in punctuation than in logic. His second sentence may be defended on the ground that its implied form is, "I shouldn't like it because I don't know a word of French."

The scheme I have outlined is based on connectives. And connectives have a great deal to do with the coherence and clarity of a piece of writing. There is, of course, a sense in which every word in a sentence is a connective. It looks before and after. It implies something already said, or something about to be said, or both. The noun suggests a verb and the verb suggests a noun; and if the verb be transitive it suggests two nouns, one as its subject and the other as its object. Every preposition points to a noun or pronoun, and every adjective presupposes a substantive to which it is attached. These are general and formal relationships, and they mingle with others more concrete and more specific. And they all keep within the bounds of the predication itself; they are the internal relationships which give it its unity and compactness. Sentences too are unified and consolidated by similar means. They too have a network of internal relations which render them ready vehicles for the transmission of precise ideas.

But this is not enough. Continuous discourse needs more than coherence within its units; it needs coherence among its units. The sentences themselves should be so related to one another that the sense flows without break from the first sentence to the last. And in a well-knit piece of prose the impetus of thought is carried on

and augmented by certain verbal devices. Words are used which bridge the breach between the sentences by referring, relating, implying, alluding, and suggesting. They are not necessarily conjunctions, though conjunctions signally serve this purpose. A pronoun will do it, or an adverb, or indeed any other part of speech. Echoes are specially useful. The repetition of a word or phrase used just before helps to keep the thought running and to keep the melody unbroken.

Among those who are adept at charging their writings with this peculiar momentum Macaulay seems to me to stand pre-eminent. And that in spite of his short sentences. For short as his sentences are, it would be difficult to find one which has no relating word. I open his *Essays* at random and my eye lights on these three consecutive sentences:

All this frightful story Mr Montagu relates fairly. He neither conceals nor distorts any material fact But he can see nothing deserving of condemnation in Bacon's conduct.

Not one of these sentences is complete and self-contained. The word *this* in the first sentence refers to something already described. The word *he* in the second sentence carries the reader's mind back to the Mr. Montagu mentioned in the first. So does the *he* in the third sentence. The word *But*, too, forms a link between the second and third sentences, for it implies that something is about to be said in the third sentence which will modify the statement—or modify some natural inference from the statement—made in the second.

Let us now look at another author whose sentences

are as short as Macaulay's, but are lacking in friendly intercourse. Emerson, who has many fine qualities undiscoverable in Macaulay, is by no means easy to read continuously. He is excellent to dip into, excellent to read in small doses, excellent to ruminate upon, but for perusing in long stretches boring in the extreme. His sentences are like beads strung on a thread, with the thread very difficult to find. Examine this passage from his essay on Behaviour:

Manners impress as they indicate real power. A man who is sure of his point, carries a broad and contented expression, which everybody reads. And you cannot rightly train one to an air and manner, except by making him the kind of man of whom that manner is the natural expression. Nature for ever puts a premium on reality. What is done for effect, is seen to be done for effect; what is done for love, is felt to be done for love. A man inspires affection and honour, because he was not lying in wait for these. The things of a man for which we visit him, were done in the dark and the cold. A little integrity is better than any career.

The ordinary man reads at a certain pace just as he speaks at a certain pace. What he cannot assimilate at that pace he impatiently puts aside as dull and uninteresting. Not being in the habit of pausing, turning back, and meditating, he assumes that what he cannot take in without trouble is not worth taking in at all. This is a regrettable fact, but a fact which every writer has to face.

O monstrous, dead, unprofitable world,  
That thou canst hear, and hearing, hold thy way !

wrote Matthew Arnold in a copy of Emerson's *Essays*.  
As a matter of fact the world did not hear; or hearing,

did not understand. Emerson is for the few who regard reading, not as a substitute for thinking, but as a stimulus to thinking. The many will not read unless their attention is arrested, and rewarded as soon as arrested. A broken thread they will not stop to mend.

Let us see then what can be done to make the above extract from Emerson a little plainer to the plain man. There is in the whole passage but one reference word, but one word that binds one sentence to another, and that is the word *And* at the beginning of the third sentence. Let us note the effect of adding a few more binding words:

Manners impress in proportion as they indicate real power. A man who has real power is sure of his point, and carries in consequence a broad and contented expression, which everybody reads. And there is only one way of training a man to a certain air and power, and that is by making him the kind of man of whom that air and power is the natural expression. That is, we must concern ourselves with the real man and not with the surface expression. For Nature ever puts a premium on reality. What is done for effect is seen to be done for effect; what is done for real love is felt to be done for real love. A man inspires love and honour because he was not lying in wait for these. The qualities for which we love and honour him, and for which we visit him, were forged when there were no witnesses—in the dark and the cold. A few of those sterling qualities are better than a great career.

This is not offered as an improvement on Emerson (it is not an improvement), but as an illustration of the way in which clearness can be increased by means of words which throw out communication lines from sentence to sentence. But may Heaven forgive me for putting water into the wine !

## CHAPTER XIV

### POETRY

How very manifestly well did not Montaigne (I think it was) say in his essay upon Value that the "inner part of Poesy is whilom hid, whilom bare, and it matters little whether it be bare or hidden."—HILAIRE BELLOC.

Science ! true daughter of Old Time thou art !  
Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.  
Why preyest thou thus upon the poet's heart,  
Vulture, whose wings are full realities ?—E. A. POE.

I put my hand upon my heart  
And swore that we should never part—  
I wonder what I should have said  
If I had put it on my head.—COLIN ELLIS.

DON'T be alarmed, good reader; I am not going to define poetry (alas ! I cannot); nor am I going to examine the various attempts at definition that have been made from Plato downwards, and then proceed to demolish them one by one. This has been done before, and done pretty thoroughly. It will suffice if I quote A. E. Housman: "A year or two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier could define a rat, but that I thought we both recognised the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us."<sup>1</sup> He then pro-

<sup>1</sup> *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, pp. 46-7.

ceeds to describe the symptoms in question—physical symptoms every one of them—a bristling of the skin, a shiver down the spine, a constriction of the throat, a precipitation of water to the eyes, a queer sensation at the pit of the stomach. This is clear and definite; it brings poetry down from the clouds and gives it a local habitation and a sign.

It also drives home the truth—a truth which nobody now disputes—that poetry makes its appeal not so much to the intellect as to the emotions. Its peculiar function is to transmit feeling rather than to communicate thought. It does, of course, communicate thought, but it does so, not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end. The end is to rouse in the mind of the reader the particular mood or emotion which the poet himself felt when he wrote the poem. It follows that a poem is always a work of art—as Tolstoy conceives art. For Tolstoy makes a clear-cut distinction between language, whose function it is to transmit thought, and art, whose function it is to transmit feeling. And poetry has a stake in both realms.

If, however, we venture to define a poem as an emotive piece of writing we find ourselves in serious difficulties. For not all words that stir our feelings are poetic. A few bald words in a telegram may move us more profoundly than any poetry that ever was written. Nor does it help us much if we limit the emotion to a special kind. For the question will at once arise: what is that special kind of emotion which it is the part of poetry to engender? And that is a question which nobody seems to be able to answer. To call it poetic emotion is to argue in a circle. To say

that it is similar in kind to that which every other work of art engenders is merely to shift the inquiry to a court of wider jurisdiction. Let us, for the present, keep out of that higher court and confine our attention to the obvious fact that a poem plays a double rôle: it conveys thought and it conveys feeling; it tells us something and it stirs us up; it appeals to the head and it appeals to the heart.

The fact that the meaning of poetry dichotomises is the starting-point of all modern criticism. Not that the idea is new. It is as old as Plato, who regarded the two functions of language as more or less antagonistic. For he opposed the philosopher to the poet; the philosopher's aim being the pursuit of the truth, and the poet's aim being to move and divert and persuade the mind of man quite apart from considerations of right and wrong, or good and evil. And it is because of their disturbing influence that he would banish poets from his ideal republic. We find Coleridge too recognising the two distinct functions of language and choosing the second as the more distinctive of true poetry. He holds that a poem is all the better for being a little obscure. The charm that it weaves works better in the twilight than in the full light of day. Mr. A. E. Housman says virtually the same thing.<sup>1</sup> He denies that the intellect is the fount of poetry, and cites the case of Christopher Smart, who could write poetry—real poetry—only when he was mad. "Even Shakespeare," he asserts, "who had so much to say, would sometimes pour out his loveliest poetry in saying nothing.

<sup>1</sup> *The Name and Nature of Poetry*, pp. 38-40.

Take, O take those lips away  
That so sweetly were forsworn,  
And those eyes, the break of day,  
Lights that do mislead the morn.  
But my kisses bring again,  
Bring again—  
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,  
Seal'd in vain !

That is nonsense; but it is ravishing poetry." Quite true. We willingly accept the extraordinary astronomical result of the brightness of the lady's eyes, and forbear to ask ourselves how she is to take away her lips and at the same time bring back her kisses. None of these trifles is of any importance. The magic of poetry is there, and that is all that matters.

The present insistence on the two aspects of poetry began with the publication of *The Meaning of Meaning* in 1923. Every subsequent writer on poetry or the criticism of poetry makes this peculiar dualism his starting-point. Although Dr. Richards, as I have already shown, distinguishes between four different kinds of meaning, he reduces them for all practical purposes to two. "A statement may be used," he says, "for the sake of the reference, true or false, which it causes. This is the *scientific* use of language. But it may also be used for the sake of the effects in emotion and attitude produced by the reference it occasions. This is the *emotive* use of language."<sup>1</sup> Here we have a division which seems clear and definite. Sense stands on one side of the line and feeling on the other. When, however, Dr. Richards shows the application of his

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 267.

dualism, as he abundantly does in his *Practical Criticism*, the borders get a little blurred. A kind of osmosis takes place. A little sense soaks into the feeling side, and a little feeling into the sense side. That is why Dr. E. M. W. Tillyard, in his book *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, discards the categories sense and feeling, or thought and emotion, and substitutes what he considers the more useful categories directness and obliquity. What language directly states is one thing, what it indirectly suggests is another. And obliquity is the term used by Dr. Tillyard for all the psychological response to the words beyond what is logically implied in the words themselves. It may include—it generally does include—ideas as well as feelings.

The distinction so well enforced and exemplified by Dr. Richards is recognised in some form or other by all modern writers. Its germ appears in De Quincey's distinction between the literature of knowledge and the literature of power. "It has always been recognised," says Mr. John Sparrow, "that words do more than merely express meaning; they sound, and they suggest; literature gives an especial importance to their other functions, and those other functions have always played a more important part in verse than they have in prose."<sup>1</sup> "The functions of language," writes Professor H. R. Huse, "are extremely complex and have been variously classified. Besides such facetious distinctions as 'to obscure thought,' 'to hide the fact that we have no thought,' language may be divided accord-

<sup>1</sup> *Sense and Poetry*, by John Sparrow, p. 4. It will be observed that Mr. Sparrow uses the word *meaning* so as to exclude emotion, whereas Dr. Richards uses it so as to include emotion.

ing to its uses into two broad classifications: (1) emotional, suggestive, or evocative language, which is used to create an attitude or to insure an action, and (2) symbolic language, which is used primarily to designate or expose."<sup>1</sup> "Many of the apparent statements in poetry," says Mr. Michael Roberts, "are not intended to make a logically significant reference at all, but an emotive 'symbolic' reference . . . Language has two main functions, the control of ideas and the control of emotions."<sup>2</sup> It will be noticed that while Professor Huse employs the word *symbol* as a sign of ideas only, Mr. Roberts employs it as a sign of emotions only. The rôles are reversed. *Symbol* is, in fact, a free-lance word which various schools of thought have tried to capture, to brand with their own mark, and to appropriate to their own use. Thus the French Symbolists have tried to impose upon it one meaning, psychoanalysts have tried to impose another, and linguists and anthropologists have tried to impose a third. Dr. Alan Gardiner, for instance, lays it down that "symbols are a sub-class of signs in which some natural connexion exists between the sign and the thing signified, e.g. the cross is a symbol of Christianity. Among words only those which are onomatopœic are symbols."<sup>3</sup> In view of this hopeless confusion I have in this book made no distinction at all between *sign* and *symbol*; I have treated the two words as roughly synonymous.

There is one point upon which all are agreed; and that is that poetry and prose are not mutually exclusive.

<sup>1</sup> *The Illiteracy of the Literate*, by H. R. Huse, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> *Critique of Poetry*, by Michael Roberts, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> *The Theory of Speech and Language*, p. 101, f.n.

The adjectives *poetical* and *prosaic* may perhaps be opposite; but the corresponding nouns *poetry* and *prose* are not. Not all that goes for prose is prosaic, nor is all that goes for poetry poetic. There is, however, a real antithesis between *verse* and *prose*; for one has a regular rhythm and the other has not. Yet even here the difference is not absolute: for prose may have metrical patches and the metre of verse may legitimately halt and change.

Sir Philip Hartog has raised the interesting question: Why is poetry written in verse? <sup>1</sup> The usual answer is that the regular beat of verse, like the tom-tom of the savage, produces a sort of hypnosis. It partly lulls the mind to sleep and puts it into a proper state to receive the full message of the poem. It acts, in fact, as a narcotic. Yet others, Coleridge, for instance, maintain that it acts as a stimulant. "They seem to assume," says Hartog, "that, because what I will call a large dose of rhythm has a narcotic effect, a small dose has necessarily the same psychological and physiological effect. I suggest that it has the opposite effect, that it increases sensibility. We know that with some persons a small dose of opium, so far from being a narcotic, produces extreme irritability and excitement." <sup>2</sup>

Hartog bases his own theory on the distinction which the psychologist makes between focal and marginal attention. He contends that the marginal attention must be engaged in order that the focal attention may

<sup>1</sup> *On the Relation of Poetry to Verse*. English Association, Pamphlet No. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Loc. cit.*, p. 16.

be free and unfettered. This curious phenomenon is thus described by William James: "It is a well-known fact that persons striving to keep their attention on a difficult subject will resort to movements of various unmeaning kinds, such as pacing the room, drumming with the fingers, playing with keys or watch-chain, scratching head, pulling moustache, vibrating foot, or what not, according to the individual. . . . Now much of this activity is unquestionably due to the overflow of emotional excitement during anxious and concentrated thought. It drains away nerve-currents which if pent-up within the thought-centres would very likely make the confusion there worse confounded. But may it not also be a means of drafting off all the irrelevant sensations of the moment, and so keeping the attention more exclusively concentrated upon its inner task?"<sup>1</sup>

Now let Hartog expound his theory in his own words.

In a paper which I read many years ago to the Psychological Society in London, I suggested that one of the main functions of rhythm, rhyme and assonance in poetry is to absorb our marginal attention, and to leave us free to concentrate our minds and feeling on the emotion expressed by the poet, and to respond to it. I pointed out that the function of absorbing the marginal attention is not the only function of these regularities of rhythm, rhyme, and assonance, and that they give an independent pleasure, akin to the melody and harmony of music: and further that that independent pleasure might be so enhanced as to divert the attention from the sense of the poem. In such a case, what was intended only to absorb the marginal attention absorbs the central attention.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, pp. 457-8.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

He goes on to point out that Swinburne not infrequently causes that kind of diversion, and he quotes in evidence this stanza from *Astrophel*:

A star in the silence that follows  
The song of the death of the sun  
Speaks music in heaven, and the hollows  
And heights of the world are as one;  
One lyre that outsings and outlightens  
The rapture of sunset, and thrills  
Mute night till the sense of it brightens  
The soul that it fills.

“For myself,” says Hartog, “the music of these lines makes them difficult to understand and not easy. As I read them the sense evades me, though a paraphrase in prose words would be perfectly clear.” I too have felt the same difficulty in reading Swinburne. I remember once taking a copy of *Atalanta in Calydon* with me on a railway journey. After reading steadily for half an hour I suddenly pulled myself up and asked myself what it was all about. I found that the sense had been drowned by the music. A melodious stream of words had passed through my mind and had left no deposit behind.

Just as verse is opposed to prose, so is poetry opposed to science—a contrast which is clearly brought out by Hartog in the following passage:

The universality of poetry is of an essentially different nature from the universality of science. The universality of science appeals to us through symbols which have, as nearly as possible, the same mental history and associations for each person; poetry appeals to us through symbols which have a mental history and associations that are different for each person, though they produce the same kind of emotion. And it is just because of the

state of attention, and sensitiveness, and isolation from the outside world, into which rhythmic language throws us, that the dormant associations of our own emotional past are awakened and summoned up at the call of the poet <sup>1</sup>

It is difficult to believe that in the history of mankind prose is a later achievement than poetry. It is still more difficult to believe that poetry is easier to write than prose. Yet there is good ground for believing that both statements are true. It is certain that the most ancient writings are in verse; and it is certain that until about two centuries ago the writings that have most profoundly influenced the human race have been poetic in spirit if not in form. As far as our country is concerned the facts are only too obvious. As Mr. Middleton Murry puts it, "Even in Elizabethan times, though prose was nearly always lively and often splendid, it could not compare as an instrument of expression with Elizabethan blank verse. Bacon, for instance, makes a poor showing compared to Montaigne. Since the pre-eminent genius of Shakespeare was not applied to developing prose, another hundred years were needed to sweat the fat off English prose, and almost another hundred to give it the grace and fertility of an organism in perfect condition. I am anxious not to be mistaken: the prose of the Authorised Version of the Bible is superb and majestic, but it is poetic prose, so is Milton's prose, so is Sir Thomas Browne's. It is prose that has glorious qualities that are not essential to prose, and has not other less striking qualities which *are* the specific qualities of prose." <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Op cit*, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *The Problem of Style*, by J. Middleton Murry, pp. 55-6.

The problem of literature according to Mr. Ezra Pound is to charge words with meaning. "Great literature," he says, "is simply language charged with meaning, to the highest possible degree."<sup>1</sup> "The language of prose is much less highly charged, that is perhaps the only availing distinction between prose and poesy. Prose permits greater factual presentation, explicitness, but a much greater amount of language is needed."<sup>2</sup>

He proceeds to argue that from the beginning of literature down to A.D. 1750 poetry was the superior art. "When we want to know what people were like before 1750, when we want to know that they had blood and bones like ourselves, we go to the poetry of the period." It was, according to him, Stendhal who was responsible for the change over from poetry to prose. Stendhal noticed one morning "that 'poetry,' *la poésie*, as the term was then understood, the stuff written by his French contemporaries, or sonorously rolled at him from the French stage, was a damn nuisance. And he remarked that poetry, with its bagwigs and its bobwigs, and its padded calves and its periwigs, its 'fustian à la Louis XIV' was greatly inferior to prose for conveying a clear idea of the diverse states of our consciousness. And at that moment the serious art of writing 'went over to prose.'"<sup>3</sup>

In point of detail this argument of Mr. Pound's is open to serious criticism, especially his claim that Stendhal was responsible for the change over. For Stendhal was not born till 1783, and long before 1750

<sup>1</sup> *The ABC of Reading*, p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> *How to Read*, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

Descartes, Pascal, Molière, Bossuet, Malebranche, and Fénelon had written their lucid and imperishable prose. Still the main thesis stands: the centre of interest in European literature has in quite modern times moved markedly in the direction of prose.

It seems, therefore, that right down the ages the human race has been educated on poetry. For thousands of years poetry formed its staple intellectual food. It ought, therefore, by this time to have developed a taste for poetry, together with a capacity for digesting and assimilating it. Have we recently thrown away our earnings? We have only to go back about two centuries to find Mr. Alexander Pope making a fortune out of a metrical translation of Homer. The book must have been read by the bulk of the reading public of the time. Who reads poetry to-day? Ask the booksellers and they will tell you that poetry sells worse than any other form of literature. Consult the libraries and you will find that the ordinary public do not read poetry. Even among the intellectual élite it is rare to find a person who reads poetry for pleasure.

It is not, therefore, surprising to find that at all ages and in all classes of society the capacity to appraise poetry is lamentably low. Those who doubt it (and indeed those who don't) should read Dr. Richards's *Practical Criticism*, a book in which the author gives an interesting and illuminating account of the opinions of a number of well educated readers upon thirteen poems which he submitted to them for criticism. He then classifies the opinions and comments on them. He shows how of all the misconceptions which appear—and they are numerous enough in all conscience—the

most deep-seated and serious arise from an inability to understand the aim and purpose of the poet. There is a constant confusion between the two functions of poetry and a constant tendency to emphasise the factual side at the expense of the emotional. It must be admitted, however, that the poems themselves are difficult. And it is possible for any man in dealing with any one of them either to condemn it outright or to laud it to the skies without proving himself to be a hopeless idiot. Each poem has a margin where differences of opinion are at least understandable.

This cannot be said of the poems which I myself used about twenty years ago in a somewhat similar piece of research.<sup>1</sup> Not that it was in any way comparable to the valuable piece of work carried out by Dr. Richards. It was much simpler, it was on a much smaller scale, and it had a different object in view. It took place at a time when the prestige of grammar in the elementary schools had greatly declined and the prestige of literature was steadily rising. But there were still a few die-hards who believed that the way of grammar, rough and thorny as it was, was the only route to the mastery of the mother tongue. And they grudged spending time over reading books—a soft and enervating pastime—when it could be devoted to the bracing task of parsing and analysis. Moreover, they believed that the study of grammar was a better proædæutic to the appreciation of great literature than preliminary excursions in the realm of literature itself.

<sup>1</sup> A fuller account appeared at the time in *The Journal of English Studies*.

It was this conflict of opinion that prompted the inquiry in question. I had no theory of criticism to test, nor had I much confidence in my own æsthetic judgment. I inclined to the view that when A spoke of good taste he meant A's; when he spoke of bad taste he meant B's. Still I believed that among people interested in books there was sufficient ground of common agreement to enable them to distinguish between fairly marked types of good poetry and of bad poetry. To what extent did this power exist among children and adolescents? Could they distinguish between good poetry and bad? Did their power of appreciation grow with their growth and general experience, or did it depend on their increasing acquaintance with books? Was literary discrimination a matter of common sense or of judicious reading? Could children's taste in reading be developed through the study of good books?

With these questions in mind I devised a test consisting of eight pieces of verse which were known to be unfamiliar to the testees. Four of these pieces were, in my opinion, unmistakably good poetry and four were unmistakably bad.

Here they are:

1. In his cool hall, with haggard eyes,  
The Roman noble lay;  
He drove abroad, in furious guise,  
Along the Appian Way.

He made a feast, drank fierce and fast,  
And crown'd his hair with flowers—  
No easier nor no quicker pass'd  
The impracticable hours.

2. Do not despair, tho' clouds dark are gathering,  
There is a lining of silvery hue;  
Never a long lane without any turning,  
Nor sky so dark without some light blue.

Never be fretful, cross, or fault finding;  
The cheerful spirit goes on free and gay;  
But those whose lives are a series of grumbling  
Always see obstacles placed in their way.

- 3 Asleep, awake, by night or day,  
The friends I seek are seeking me.  
No wind can drive my bark astray  
Nor change the tide of destiny.

The stars come nightly to the sky;  
The tidal wave unto the sea;  
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high  
Can keep my own away from me.

4. A land that is lonelier than ruin;  
A sea that is stranger than death;  
Far fields that a rose never blew in,  
Wan waste where the winds lack breath;  
Waste endless and boundless and flowerless  
But of marsh-blossoms fruitless as free;  
Where earth lies exhausted, as powerless  
To strive with the sea.

5. Now, Johnny all night long had heard  
The owls in tuneful concert strive;  
No doubt, too, he the moon had seen;  
For in the moonlight he had been  
From eight o'clock till five.

And thus to Betty's question he  
Made answer, like a traveller bold,  
(His very words I give to you)  
"The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo,  
And the sun did shine so cold."

6. Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig the grave and let me lie :  
Glad did I live and gladly die,  
And I laid me down with a will.

Thus be the verse you grave for me:  
"Here he lies where he longed to be;  
Home is the sailor, home from the sea,  
And the hunter home from the hill."

7. From winter's sleep once more awoke,  
The snowdrop pure we see,  
As if to charm and to invoke  
Our love and sympathy.

When all around is wild and bare  
And blossoms still unborn  
The snowdrop, pure, repels despair  
Our gardens to adorn.

8. Obedience in youth how very becoming,  
How cheerful the lives of those who obey,  
Who never are sullen, cross or fault-finding,  
But obedient at school, at work or at play.

Obedience a virtue that never will tarnish,  
But shine in its splendour on land and on sea;  
Wherever 'tis practised all errors will vanish,  
And clear as crystal all work will then be.

Before proceeding further, the reader is invited to make an attempt at classifying the extracts for himself. He will no doubt recognise some of them and will have

no difficulty in separating the poetry from the piffle. I myself regard Nos. 1, 3, 4, and 6 as good poetry and the rest as bad. The order of merit in which I somewhat hesitatingly range them is: 1, 3, 6, 4, 5, 7, 2, 8. I submitted the test to a number of well-read friends and colleagues, and although they all agreed with me as to the broad division into good and bad, only one arranged them in precisely the same order. I lay no stress, therefore, on the particular order; but I do on the broad classification.

An obvious and just criticism of the test is that the extracts are too short. He who knows the source invests the extract with the glamour of the whole poem. The reader ignorant of the context judges at a disadvantage. Admitting all this, I think it will be conceded that four of these extracts have enough of the true ring about them to compel recognition by a cultured mind, while the other four are distinctly lacking in that quality.

No. 1 is from Matthew Arnold's *Obermann Once More*, No. 3 from John Burroughs's *Waiting*, No. 4 from Swinburne's *By the North Sea*, No. 5 from Wordsworth's *Idiot Boy*, and No. 6 is a complete poem (*Requiem*), by R. L. Stevenson. The rest are from the works of a provincial poetess.

The test was set to the highest class in eight elementary schools, to the second class in three schools, and to the third class in one. It was also given to seven classes of training college students, and to one class of older teachers who were studying for the Preliminary Examination for the Teacher's Certificate. Each member of the class was provided with a copy of

the test, and was asked to read it through carefully several times and arrange the pieces in order of merit, giving the reason for his choice of the best, and the reason for his choice of the worst.

The general order for the class was estimated on the voting principle. The pupil was supposed to have given eight votes for the first on the list, seven votes for the second, and so forth. In the tabulated results which follow, the classes are arranged in the order of their success in choosing the four good pieces, which are printed in heavy type.

#### ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

*Ages of children from 12 to 14. Class I is the highest in the school*

|                              |   |   |   |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| { Girls' School A Class I    | . | . | 7 | <b>4</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>1</b> | 8        | 2        | 5        |
| "    "    A    "    II       | . | . |   | <b>6</b> | <b>7</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 8        | 1        | 5        |
| "    "    B    "    I        | . | . | 4 | <b>6</b> | 8        | 7        | 2        | <b>1</b> | <b>3</b> | 5        |
| "    "    A    "    III      | . | . | 6 | 7        | 8        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 2        | 1        | 5        |
| Mixed    "    C    "    I    | . | . | 7 | <b>3</b> | 8        | 2        | <b>4</b> | <b>6</b> | 1        | 5        |
| { Boys'    "    D    "    I  | . | . | 2 | 8        | <b>6</b> | 7        | 1        | <b>4</b> | <b>3</b> | 5        |
| { Girls'    "    E    "    I | . | . | 8 | 2        | <b>6</b> | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 1        | 5        |
| { Boys'    "    F    "    I  | . | . | 8 | 2        | 7        | <b>6</b> | 1        | <b>4</b> | <b>3</b> | 5        |
| "    "    F    "    II       | . | . | 2 | 7        | 8        | 1        | <b>6</b> | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 5        |
| { Girls'    "    G    "    I | . | . | 8 | 7        | 2        | <b>6</b> | <b>3</b> | 1        | <b>4</b> | 5        |
| { Boys'    "    H    "    I  | . | . | 7 | 2        | 8        | 1        | <b>3</b> | <b>6</b> | 5        | <b>4</b> |
| { Mixed    "    C    "    II | . | . | 8 | 7        | 2        | <b>4</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>3</b> | 1        | 5        |

#### TRAINING COLLEGES

*Ages of students from 18 to 22*

|                     |   |   |   |          |          |          |          |          |          |          |   |
|---------------------|---|---|---|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| First year, men     | . | . | . | <b>4</b> | <b>3</b> | 7        | <b>6</b> | <b>1</b> | 2        | 5        | 8 |
| Second year, women  | . | . | . | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>6</b> | <b>1</b> | 2        | 5        | 8 |
| Second year, men    | . | . | . | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | <b>1</b> | 2        | <b>6</b> | 8        | 5 |
| { Second year, men  | . | . | . | 7        | <b>4</b> | <b>1</b> | <b>3</b> | 8        | 2        | <b>6</b> | 5 |
| { First year, women | . | . | . | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 2        | <b>6</b> | 1        | 8        | 5 |
| Second year, men    | . | . | . | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 2        | 1        | 8        | <b>6</b> | 5 |
| First year, men     | . | . | . | 7        | <b>3</b> | <b>4</b> | 8        | 2        | 1        | <b>6</b> | 5 |

## UNQUALIFIED TEACHERS

*Average age over 30*

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Women . . . . .                                       | 2 | 7 | 8 | 4 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 5 |
| General order for children . . .                      | 8 | 7 | 2 | 6 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 5 |
| General order for training college students . . . . . | 7 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 8 | 5 |

The number of elementary-school children averaged 26 per class, and of training college students, 21. The class of unqualified teachers numbered 18.

With the exception of No. 5 each extract was put first by somebody, and with the exception of No. 7 each extract was put last.

Some reasons for the selection of the best are quoted.

*No. 1*—A true word picture (boy) I like No. 1 best on the grounds that anyone with a good imagination can conjure up the scene of a large hall with the previous night's potatoes strewn over walls and benches (boy). It prepares one for something brisk and lively. I want to go on with it, but alas ' it is finished (boy).

*No. 2*.—It has a lot of meaning behind it, and some of it is true (boy).

*No. 4*.—Because it is in that fine heroic measure which is so dramatic. The verse is a form of octavo rima (girl).

*No. 6*.—Because it seems sad (girl) Because it has a touch of sadness in it (girl). It is beautiful in its simplicity and easily understood (boy).

*No. 7*.—We are downcast, full of remorse and sorrow, given to despair, symbolic of winter. Then, as the snowdrop, we meet with brightness, sent from above. We are full of joy, bubbling with gladness, forsaken of despair. We have reached the climax ! (boy). It seems as if you had had more you would lose yourself in it (girl).

*No. 8*.—Because there are some good words there, such as

tarnish and practised (boy) Work will be cheerful and crystal-line (boy). A poem with a moral behind it is better than one with no moral (girl).

The bulk of the reasons given, however, refer to good rhyme and rhythm and to the agreeableness of the topic. When a poem is disliked it is, as a rule, on the score of its subject rather than its form. I quote a few interesting reasons for placing the extracts last.

*No. 1*—It seems stern, no light brightens the verse (boy). It seems more fit for boys (girl). If it were altered a little it would read better but would not rhyme (girl). I don't think he could have been a nice Roman noble (girl). It seems as if the poem was written for a romantic sentimental old lady (boy). This is a dismal scene. Is there not enough sorrow and despair with which to sympathise, than to feel sorrow for incidents which never occurred? (boy). "Impracticable" spoils the effect (man). There is no effort to be lofty (man). One might infer that the cool hall had haggard eyes (man). "Drank fierce and fast" would of course be better "fiercely and fastly" (man). The two verses teem with errors (man). [Shades of Matthew Arnold!] The picture makes me disgusted. The ideas are too hurried to allow one to think, even if one desired to do so (woman). Reminds me of "The Village Blacksmith"—probably a meaningless parody (woman). In line seven there are three negatives (man). [Several objected to "impracticable," and some suggested "head" as an improvement on "hair" in the sixth line.]

*No. 2*.—It is goody-goody (man). Whether "gathering" and "turning" are meant to rhyme is not clear. If they are they don't (man). You cannot have a series of one thing—grumbling (man). [Several of the adults asserted that the following words are not suitable for poetry: *series, obstacles, fretful, fault-finding, and grumbling.*]

*No. 3*.—No real scene from life, only a faked piece (boy). The first line is redundant. It is usual for people to be asleep

by night and awake by day (man). The line "the stars come nightly to the sky" is impractical (man). "Deep and high" should be "depth and height" (man). There are a number of hard consonants and explosives (man).

*No. 4.*—Because a lot of it must be imaginary, for not many men would visit any desolate island to get information to write a poem (boy). It seems to get all muddled up in my mind (girl). It does not keep to one point but mixes up seas and fields and marshes (boy). Evidently the writer meant the fourth line to be alliterated—but it is not, and is an utter failure if it is intended to carry some force with it (man). More attention is paid to rhyme than to sense. Roses do not blow, ruin is not necessarily lonely, winds do not lack breath (man). The words selected are ugly, with special reference to the line "Waste endless and boundless and flowerless" (man). A place can hardly be thought of that can embody all the things that are left out in it (woman). "Blew in" and "ruin" are bad rhymes (man). [Several considered the last line imperfect. One boy suggested the insertion of "restless" or "angry" before "sea"; and a girl suggested "open."]

*No. 5*—It might please a small child (boy). Babyish and silly (girl). It seems a made-up piece without any real thought (boy). It would be very good for a comic paper (boy). The ends of the lines are too far apart (boy). Not an entrancing poem (boy). I can't understand why Johnny answers a question that has not been asked (girl). It seems like a parody of "The Wreck of the Hesperus" (girl). The man seems insane (girl). [It is not clear whether she refers to Johnny or the poet.] Written by a very immature poet (man). Might very well be composed by a Standard IV boy (man). Anybody could write an easy piece like this (girl). I could make it up myself (girl). [All this seems to be a judgment on Wordsworth for his remark on Shakespeare's sonnets. The general verdict on this poem is that it is silly. It, however, suffers more than any of the others by its removal from its context.]

*No. 6.*—Because it seems so ludicrous (boy). It might be an effort of a schoolboy's whose ideas regarding metre are very much confused (man). "Glad did I live and gladly die" is

ungrammatical (man). It does not seem to me as if the poet had treated the piece in a manner serious enough (man)

No 7.—Any common-place person could have written it (girl).

No. 8.—When you are reading it it takes your breath away (girl). I should think it was written by a Sunday School teacher, or some one very sentimental (boy). More like a sermon than a piece of poetry (girl). Because he moralises (man). It reads like a copy-book exercise (man). A good moral piece that gets on one's nerves (woman). Too swingy (woman). It is the kind of rhymed moral maxim that was always particularly objectionable to me (woman). There is an undertone of irony in the first verse (woman). I dislike the smugness of the lines (man). The lines and phrases in this piece of poetry are exceedingly common-place (boy).

It will be seen that although exceptional children show keen insight, the critical ability of even youths and maidens of twenty is by no means high. Of the various grounds of criticism the grammatical ground seemed to be as feeble and fatuous as any. Moreover, the elementary schools which devoted much time to grammar all stand low on the list.

The results afford distinct evidence of the value of direct and definite instruction in literature. Schools A and B were distinguishable from the other schools tested by the fact that they alone possessed a comprehensive scheme of literature. They alone had for many years encouraged and secured the extensive reading of good books by all the children in the school, and they came out at the top of the list. The best four classes came from these two schools. Indeed, the third class in School A was better than the first class in any of the other schools except B. Such a result was in no way due to the natural superiority of the children

attending these two schools, nor to any exceptional features in the curriculum beyond the amount of time allotted to literature. Some of the other schools on the list differed in being attended by a better type of children, in devoting much time to grammar, and in having a foreign tongue included in the course of studies. It follows that the finer appreciation of literature displayed by the children of schools A and B was mainly due to direct teaching. The training-college results point to the same conclusion; for the class at the top of the list was the only one which took up a special course in literature.

As might have been expected, the college students showed, on the whole, much better literary taste than the elementary-school children. That other factors were operative besides maturity and experience is indicated by the fact that the class of unqualified teachers did as badly as the worst of the elementary-school children.

It does not seem probable that children could enter into the sentiment of Stevenson's *Requiem*, and yet they gave it no lower position than did the grown-ups. It was its note of sadness that appealed to them. The high position of No. 7, the vapid verses on the snowdrop, is rather astonishing. Grown-ups like it as well as children. It illustrates what Dr. Richards calls the *stock response*. People have learnt to believe that sentiments about flowers, and gardens, about the promise of spring, and the pageant of the seasons, are, in the very nature of things, poetic. Whether the sentiments are sincere or not is quite a secondary matter.

The children's favourite of all, however, is No. 8, the

ridiculous exaltation of obedience as a virtue; and No. 2, with its facile optimism, comes a good third. It is the exceptional child who dislikes moralising; the ordinary child takes it in with such avidity that he swallows unawares a deal of nonsense with it. Many professed a dislike of the first piece on the ground that the Roman noble was wicked.

The distinct weaklings among the test pieces are Nos. 2, 7, and 8. Their main defect is not, I take it, that the phrases are hackneyed (for some of our best poetry is hackneyed, and what is stale to the adult is often fresh to the child), nor yet that the expressions are prosaic and commonplace (for the child is too inexperienced to distinguish between the verbal usages of poetry and prose even if such a distinction be desirable), but that the thought behind the words is either feeble or false. They do not exhibit the nonsense that doesn't matter, but the nonsense that does matter. For when their nonsense is taken away there is nothing left.

The main outcome of this inquiry was a strengthening of one's belief that a sound appreciation of English poetry is not wholly the result of what is called general training, but is, at least partly, the product of direct instruction. It was shown, too, that in acquiring literary taste little aid is afforded to young children by instruction in English grammar, or by learning a foreign tongue.

Children's frank comments on what they read are as a rule illuminating and refreshing. They sometimes try to be funny—and succeed. I have before me a schoolboy's copy of *Macbeth*, which I picked up on a

second-hand bookstall. The previous owner, whose initials were J. M. T., had in a boyish hand scrawled sundry comments in the margin. His frivolous interpolations to some of Lady Macbeth's lines are here given in parentheses. "What's done cannot be undone." (Quite possible. What about my trousers?) "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (Rather nice!) "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (Try Anzora.)

The witches come in for a large share of his gibes. "Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting." (That is clever! a blind-worm hasn't got a sting.) "Lizard's leg and *howlet's* wing" (as bad as dropping them). "Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble." (This is proper stuff!) "Cool it with a baboon's blood, then . . ." (and then it is school-house stew). When he comes across a line that specially takes his fancy—it's generally a gory one—he writes, "Good effort" (sometimes spelled "effert"), and on one occasion, "Good for you, Shakespeare. Quite a nice line."

## CHAPTER XV

### THE MODERNISTS

He was dull in a new way.—SAMUEL JOHNSON

Anything that happens to mind in England has usually happened somewhere else first —EZRA POUND.

The body is but a pair of pincers set over a bellows and a stewpan and the whole fixed upon stilts —SAMUEL BUTLER.

THE same restless drive of the time-spirit that has produced the sculpture of Epstein and the music of Stravinsky has also brought forth the prose of James Joyce and the poetry of T. S. Eliot. And it is equally difficult to say whether the product is healthy or decadent, whether these new ventures of the human spirit are in the main stream of progress, or whether they move among eddies and backwaters, and are destined in the course of time to be forgotten by all save the cranky and the curious. Is English literature in its later and more freakish manifestations striking out a new and fruitful line of advance, or is it merely developing a new disease? I cannot answer these questions, but I can point to certain characteristics in the writings of the extreme modernists,<sup>1</sup> and I can try to explain what they are trying to do and why they are trying to do it.

Or at least I can give Dr. Richards's explanation.

<sup>1</sup> I use the term *modernist* as distinct from *modern* to indicate that small but assertive group of writers who represent the left wing, and who claim to be breaking new ground.

For Dr. Richards is the theorist of the new school of poetry. He explains it and expounds it and defends it against attack. He has laid down certain principles of criticism which, though not perhaps formulated for that purpose, do seem to justify the eccentricities of some of our younger poets. It is well, therefore, to listen to what Dr. Richards has to say.

He rests his critical doctrine on a psychological basis.<sup>1</sup> His main thesis is that the human mind is not so much a mass of ideas as a mass of impulses. It is not the intellect that rules and regulates the life of man, but the interests and impulses which belong to him as a living organism. His weal or woe, therefore, depends on the satisfaction or the thwarting of those impulses. The mind is like a number of delicate balances which can be disturbed by certain stimuli coming from within the body or from without; and the restoration of equilibrium among these impulses is the sole aim and purpose of life as it flows on from moment to moment. And since our emotions and attitudes are simply the feel of this change of poise and this trend towards equilibrium, and the intellect itself merely a means of making the inner harmony more certain and more complete, man is not essentially a rational creature with a mind to be enlightened, but an emotional creature with needs to be satisfied. It follows that prose, which appeals to the intellect, is of less importance to him than poetry, which appeals to the emotions.

Dr. Richards is no mystic; he is a behaviourist, a behaviourist being a psychologist who does not believe

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 81-91. *Science and Poetry*, pp. 16-19.

in psychology. He prefers to pin his faith to physiology. "That the mind is the nervous system, or rather a part of its activity, has long been evident, although the prevalence among psychologists of persons with philosophic antecedents has delayed the recognition of the fact in an extraordinary fashion."<sup>1</sup> This statement suggests that the behaviourist creed is one towards which all thinkers are gradually moving. It would be truer, I think, to say that it is a creed from which thinkers are retreating. It is not a new doctrine. It is one which Descartes applied to animals but refused to apply to man. Man, he maintained, had a mind distinct from the body. T. H. Huxley taught it at one time. He contended that consciousness had no more to do with running the body than the whistle of a locomotive had to do with running the train. The recent recrudescence of the theory arose from the fact that Professor William McDougall in his little book on Psychology in the Home University Library defined Psychology as the science of behaviour. When, however, Mr. J. B. Watson in America took up the definition, gave it a narrow and literal interpretation, and worked it up into a comprehensive system, the author of the phrase disowned his own offspring. He said that that was not at all what he meant.

I am not going to discuss the theory here beyond saying that it is an attempt to explain the known by the less known; to interpret mind, of which we know a little, in terms of brain, of which we know less. It is, in fact, more credible to me that the body is part of the mind than that the mind is part of the body.

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 83.

After all, as a character in *Joseph Vance* remarks, a man has to choose between believing that he is a corpse and believing that he is a ghost. If Dr. Richards prefers to think of himself as a corpse, that is his own affair.

Fortunately, however, this belief of his does not affect his æsthetic theory. Broadly speaking, he agrees with Tolstoy, who asserts that art is not concerned with any unique factor called beauty, but with the whole of human experience. It is a means of transferring feeling from one man to another, no matter what that feeling may be. It is true that when the feeling is pleasurable we are prone to ascribe it to some objective quality that we designate beauty; which, says Dr. Richards, is a fatal mistake. He attaches great importance to the fact that beauty is a quality not of the object or stimulus, but of our emotive responses to that stimulus. He quotes Hume as saying: "Beauty is no quality in things themselves: it exists merely in the mind that contemplates them." Quite so! but Hume presses his argument further than that. He follows the same line of reasoning to show that any other quality of the material world, and indeed the material world itself, belongs to the percipient mind. What then becomes of the doctrine of behaviourism? And what advantage is there (Dr. Richards implies there is a huge advantage) in ascribing beauty to the response rather than to the stimulus?

However, Dr. Richards agrees with Tolstoy—that is the main point—in believing that art is chiefly concerned not with the beautiful or the pleasurable, or with any specifically æsthetic factor, but with something which is more vitally concerned with the health and welfare

of the self. It is true that, through the medium of art, feelings are transferred from one human being to another; but there are feelings and feelings. They differ in kind no less than in quantity, and we do not value all the kinds alike. How are we to discriminate between them? Tolstoy answers the question quite simply and definitely. He goes outside the feelings themselves and makes religion the criterion. "In every age," he says, "and in every society, there exists a religious sense, common to that whole society, of what is good and what is bad, and it is this religious conception that decides the value of the feelings transmitted by art."<sup>1</sup> That art is good, therefore, which promotes the aims of religion; that art is bad which doesn't. It is here that Dr. Richards joins issue with Tolstoy. He refuses to go outside the feelings themselves, or, if you like, the interests from which the feelings arise. The purpose of art is to produce harmony among the opposing tendencies in the mind itself. It is to resolve conflicts. It is to give the highest satisfaction by satisfying the maximum number of impulses and thwarting the minimum. "The most valuable states of mind then," he says, "are those which involve the widest and most comprehensive co-ordination of activities and the least curtailment, conflict, starvation, and restriction. States of mind in general are valuable in the degree in which they tend to reduce waste and frustration."<sup>2</sup>

This theory is twin-brother to the ethical doctrine expounded by William James in his *Essay on The*

<sup>1</sup> *What is Art?*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 59.

Moral Philosopher and Moral Life. He holds the view that every human desire, need, or demand makes itself valid by the mere fact that it exists, and the essence of good is to satisfy those desires. But unfortunately they war with one another. He goes on to say: "Since everything that is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*? That act must be the best act, accordingly, which makes for the *best whole*, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions. In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which *prevail at the least cost*, or by whose realisation the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed" <sup>1</sup> So morality is in a sense a matter of profit and loss, in which desires are the coins, and all the coins are of equal value—or at any rate are made of the same metal. Dr. Richards is not satisfied with this dead level of worth—he speaks of different "levels of attitude development" His reasons for thinking one level higher than another, however, are not entirely convincing.

This long preamble has been necessary in order to show why the modernist school of poetry takes poetry so seriously. It is not to them a mere pastime. It is not an escape from the miseries of life; it is a sane and beneficent means of adjustment to the miseries of life. It is a sort of medicine: a catharsis, a specific for the malady of the age. It cleanses the foul bosom of that

<sup>1</sup> *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, by William James, p. 205.

perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart. "The importance to mankind of expressing, of airing this primal feeling [of melancholy] can scarcely be overestimated. It is there, the blight, the burden, call it what you will, and it can only do damage if ignored or suppressed. And conversely, to have it sought out and dragged to the light may give intense joy and relief. Poetry is one of the chief means to this process."<sup>1</sup> "One thing only perhaps is certain; what happens is the exact opposite to a deadlock, for compared to the experience of great poetry every other state of mind is one of bafflement."<sup>2</sup>

It is well to bear in mind, however, that there are other views on the matter. Mr. H. L. Mencken, for instance, speaks with his usual force and frankness on the side of the Philistine: "Some of the best verse in the modern movement, at home and abroad, has been written by intellectual adolescents who could no more write a first-rate paragraph in prose than they could leap the Matterhorn—girls just out of Newnham and Vassar, young army officers, elderly fat women, obscure lawyers and doctors, newspaper reporters, all sorts of hollow dilettanti, male and female. Nine-tenths of the best poetry of the world has been written by poets less than thirty years old; a great deal more than half of it has been written by poets under twenty-five."<sup>3</sup> "In brief, poetry is a comforting piece of fiction set to more or less lascivious music—a slap on the back in waltz time—a grand release of longings and repressions to

<sup>1</sup> E M W Tillyard . *Poetry Direct and Oblique*, pp. 51-2.

<sup>2</sup> I. A Richards : *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p 252.

<sup>3</sup> *Selected Prejudices* (The Travellers' Library), pp. 11-12.

the tune of flutes, harps, sackbuts, psalteries and the usual strings.”<sup>1</sup>

“On the precise nature of this beautiful balderdash you can get all the information you need by opening at random the nearest book of verse. The ideas you will find in it may be divided into two main divisions. The first consists of denials of objective facts; the second of denials of subjective facts. Specimen of the first sort:

God's in his heaven,  
All's right with the world.

Specimen of the second:

I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.

It is my contention that all poetry (forgetting, for the moment, its possible merit as mere sound) may be resolved into either one or the other of these frightful imbecilities—that its essential character lies in the bold flouting of what every reflective adult knows to be the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

In quoting Browning and Henley—poets of yesterday—Mr. Mencken is scarcely fair to the poets of to-day. For the last thing they can be suspected of is an undue optimism. Indeed, Mr. Mencken would be hard put to it to match either of these quotations from the pages of modernist poetry.

Make no mistake about it: the modernist poets and their sympathisers are in dead earnest. As I have said before, they regard poetry as a specific cure for the

<sup>1</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 17-18.

malady of the age. We live in a world that carries not only the common burden of humanity but an added burden of disillusion and depression. A sort of blight seems to have fallen on things. And the remedy for it all is not the wiser education of the young, nor the setting of the nation's house in order, nor the League of Nations; not social reform, nor politics, nor religion, nor philosophy, nor science—but poetry. Not any sort of poetry, mark you, but only that poetry upon which the modern school has set its imprimatur and its seal.

Let us hear, therefore, what they have to say for themselves, or what their spokesmen have to say for them. The first thing that strikes one is that they all say the same sort of thing and they all praise the same sort of poet. They all, for instance, extol Mr. T. S. Eliot. Dr. Richards devotes an appendix of seven pages to the defence of his poetry.<sup>1</sup> Alida Monro, in the introduction to her anthology *Recent Poetry* 1923–33, states that the reader of the previous anthology issued by the Poetry Bookshop (*Georgian Poetry*) “would not know that a poem was included in *Catholic Anthology* in 1914, and was published as a slim paper-covered volume in 1917, whose appearance passed almost unnoticed except by the most acute observers, and whose influence has been almost as disturbing to the poetry of our time as the assassination at Sarajevo was to the peace of Europe. I refer, of course, to *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T. S. Eliot. At the time of its publication no one could have foretold that it was to be the source of the poetry of the next twenty years;

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, pp. 289–95.

nor that the heaven then introduced into the vat would work and work, until now, after sixteen years, it is still foaming and frothing in the productions of most of our younger poets."

The love song referred to will be found at the beginning of *Poems* 1909-25.<sup>1</sup> It is quite short—only 131 lines—and should be read by all who do not know what the new poetry is like. They must not expect to understand it, for it is not intended to be understood. It is not a scientific treatise, but a poem. And all the reader has to do is to expose his mind to its influence. He will no doubt wonder why it is called a love poem, and who or what Mr. J. Alfred Prufrock is, but he should suppress such irrelevant curiosity and yield himself fully and frankly to the blandishments of the poem. It is not supposed to inform his mind but to reform his mind. It is what Dr. Richards calls "a music of ideas"; and the ideas "are there to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out." Like other music it has its refrains. Here is one of them:

In the room the women come and go  
Talking of Michaelangelo.

This couplet appears twice, and so does this one:

That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all.

But the reader should judge the poem for himself, and then attack—or rather subject himself to—the more considerable ones that come later, such as *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*.

<sup>1</sup> *Poems* 1909-25, by T. S. Eliot (Faber & Faber).

Then again there is Mr. Ezra Pound. Mr. Eliot in his latest book, *After Strange Gods*, asserts that "Mr. Pound is probably the most important living poet in our language." Indeed, Mr. Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* to him, describing him as *il miglior fabbro*. So Mr. Pound is not a man to be ignored, or to be taken lightly. He is, in fact, an extraordinarily interesting person. We may disagree with him, or even dislike him, but we are forced to admit that the world would be a less entertaining place without him. We have only to dip into his recent book *The ABC of Reading*, and the selection of his poems recently published by Faber and Faber, to realise that he is a rebel, an original, and an eccentric. He describes himself in *Who's Who* as a follower of Confucius and Ovid. Indeed, his idols are never idols of the theatre; they are idols which he has discovered (or invented) for himself. He has his own views—and very strong views too—on what a training in literature should mean.

He thinks, with Matthew Arnold, that the only way to form a sound taste in literature is to gain acquaintance with the great masters, but he does not agree with Arnold as to their identity. And he called Palgrave "a doddard." "It struck me," he said, "that the best history of painting in London was the National Gallery, and that the best history of literature, more particularly of poetry, would be a twelve-volume anthology in which each poem was chosen not merely because it was a nice poem or a poem Auntie Hepsy liked, but because it contained an invention, a definite contribution to the art of verbal expression."<sup>1</sup> He

<sup>1</sup> *How to Read*, p. 10.

was never able to carry out his project. One difficulty was that while the foreign pictures in the National Gallery did not need translating into English, most of the poems in the Pound anthology did.

In his racy slangy way Ezra Pound has many good things to tell us. Here are some of them:

Literature is news that *stays* news.

Music rots when it gets *too far* from the dance. Poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music

Nothing is more boring than an account of errors one has not committed.

The great writers need no debunking. The pap is not in them and does not need to be squeezed out.

"Poetry" was considered to be (as it is still considered by a great number of drivelling imbeciles) synonymous with "lofty and flowery language"

And here are a few of his heterodox opinions:

Chaucer had a deeper knowledge of life than Shakespeare.

Thucydides was a journalist

The decline of England began the day when Landor packed his trunks and departed to Tuscany.

There are certain poets for whom the modernists have a special predilection; they are John Donne,<sup>1</sup> William Blake, Baudelaire, Mallarmé and the French Symbolists, Thomas Hardy and W. B. Yeats. And there is one about whom they cannot agree but whom they cannot leave alone—Edgar Allan Poe. They cannot leave him alone because the French Symbolists admire him, and they admire the French Symbolists. They cannot agree about him partly because his poetry is popular, and that raises a strong presumption against

<sup>1</sup> Not the religious Donne, but the erotic Donne.

its merit, and partly because he theorised about poetry, and nobody can theorise about poetry without rousing strong opposition. Mr. Aldous Huxley, having given his own twist to the meaning of vulgarity, holds up Edgar Allan Poe as an awful example of vulgarity,<sup>1</sup> and yet he includes one of Poe's poems (*The City in the Sea*) in his *Anthology with Commentaries*.<sup>2</sup> Miss Laura Riding sees no merit in Poe. Instead of agreeing with Lowell, who wrote: "Here comes Poe with his Raven, like Barnaby Rudge—Three fifths of him genius and two fifths mere fudge," she thinks he is all fudge.<sup>3</sup> Dr Richards thinks that few things are worse than *The Black Cat*; Mr. Bernard Shaw thinks that few things are better than *The Lady Ligeia*. We may be sure that Poe will survive both the praise and the blame.

The most striking characteristic of modernist poetry is its logical incoherence. It is unintelligible. Even when its separate parts, its phrases or its lines, are intelligible, the parts fail to hang together, and the whole is like an unsolved puzzle. Here, for instance, is a complete poem by Ezra Pound<sup>4</sup>:

#### PAPYRUS

Springs . . .  
Too long. . .  
Gongula. . .

And these are the last lines of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*, which Dr. Richards describes as the most beautiful of Mr. Eliot's poems:

<sup>1</sup> *Vulgarity in Literature* (The Hogarth Press).

<sup>2</sup> *Texts and Pretexts, an Anthology with Commentaries*, pp. 234-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Contemporaries and Snobs*, p. 208.

<sup>4</sup> *Selected Poems*, p. 92.

Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the Shadow.

*For Thine is the Kingdom.*

For Thine is  
Life is  
For Thine is the

*This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

The defence is that being poetry and not prose, it is not supposed to be understood in the strict logical sense. It is not direct statement, it is obliquity. And "an attitude of intellectual suspicion," Dr. Richards informs us, "must certainly be abandoned."

Since the modernist school—critics and poets alike—make so sharp a distinction between prose, which is clear, and poetry, which is foggy, one would naturally expect them to keep the fog out of their prose. But they don't. Their prose is not always clear, nor always free from double meanings, nor always in accord with the best English usage. Here are two sentences from the same page of *The ABC of Reading*:

Perhaps that courage only comes when one knows to what extent ignorance is almost universal.

When you get to the serious consideration of any work of art, our faculties or memories or perceptions are all too "spotty" to permit anything save mutual curiosity.

Ponder them well, and note the logical looseness and inconsistency.

Here are some other examples of Mr. Pound's capricious English:

. . . certain developments in Provençal which are not in Greek, and which are of a different KIND than the Greek.

Gavin Douglas knew the sea better than Virgil had.

Dr. Tillyard has these sentences:

And between each figure there grows a palm-tree  
Neither group have carried their inquiries far enough.  
Both were very popular in their time, neither are read to-day.

Mr. Michael Roberts writes, as a rule, good perspicuous prose; but he can also write like this:

Every statesman claims to know the remedy, but the modern poet differs from the statesman in so far as he believes who are valuing the wrong things and that "a change of heart" is necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. T. S. Eliot's prose is admirable taken as a whole. There are passages, however, which are anything but clear. What are we to make of this, for instance?

There are two kinds of "sports" in poetry, in the floricultural sense. One is the imitation of development, and the other is the imitation of some Idea of originality. The former is commonplace, a waste product of civilisation. The latter is contrary to life.<sup>2</sup>

The reader at once begins to wonder why it is *development* that is imitated in one case and an *Idea of*

<sup>1</sup> *Critique of Poetry*, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Introduction to *Selected Poems*, Ezra Pound, p. x.

*originality* in the other. It is true that Mr. Eliot points out later that there are two kinds of originality, the *true* and the *spurious*; but this only sets the reader wondering whether an imitation of *spurious* originality is any worse than an imitation of *true* originality. Or whether the substitution of an *Idea* (with a capital I) would make any difference. I give it up.

Dr. Richards must have a keen eye for ambiguities, for it was he who set Mr. William Empson on the quest for the seven types of ambiguity.<sup>1</sup> And he cannot be unaware of the fact that a negative clause or a double assertion followed by a causal clause is always ambiguous. If, for instance, I say that Julius Cæsar Jones did not spend the night at the club because he was afraid of his wife, I may mean either that he did spend the night at the club or that he didn't. The sentence admits of both interpretations. Hence he should have avoided writing this sentence:

We do not sufficiently realise how great a part of our experiences takes the form it does, because we are social beings and accustomed to communication from infancy.<sup>2</sup>

It is not clear whether *because* belongs to *not realise*, or to *takes*. The comma suggests the former interpretation, the context suggests the latter.

Nor should Dr. Richards—unless of course he were writing poetry, where apparently the more ambiguities a person can put in the better—refer to “the generations with different attitudes which follow” when it is the generations that follow and not the attitudes.

<sup>1</sup> *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, by William Empson.

<sup>2</sup> *Principles of Literary Criticism*, p. 25.

All this, however, merely shows that a man may be so preoccupied with poetry as to neglect his prose.

Another characteristic of the new poets is their disdain of traditional rhythm and diction. They have little liking for what used to be known as poetical language, and no great regard for the language of reputable prose. They love to insert snippets from the classics and to interlard their lines with snatches of French, Italian, or any other language they happen to affect; and if they can weave in a few exotic or recondite words they seem specially happy. Here are a few curiosities which have taken me but a few minutes to collect: *concitation*, *defunctive*, *maculate*, *philoprogenitive*, *zithering*, *hydroptic*, *multifoliate*, *glyptic*, *nystagmus*, *praculative*, and *custal*. Pound's impressive vocabulary is left out for lack of space.

A fondness for allusion, as distinct from quotation, is not a trait peculiar to the school. Allusion is a device used by all poets. Vergil is full of allusions to Homer, and Milton is full of allusions to Vergil. It is a means of borrowing glamour from a recognised classic and of giving the reader a sense of intimacy and confidence. If, for instance, I remark that I have been trying to steep my mind in modernist poetry, but somehow or other, cheerfulness would keep breaking in, I am virtually saying to the discerning reader: You and I know our Boswell, and are quite familiar with the conversation between Edwards and Johnson in which Edwards says, "You are a philosopher, Dr. Johnson. I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking

in.”<sup>1</sup> The allusiveness of the new poets, however, is more subtle, more frequent, and more exclusive. By demanding in the reader a much wider range of literary knowledge than is possessed by the ordinary man they narrow the circle of their admirers. Mr. Eliot has made allusiveness so essential a part of *The Waste Land* that he has thought fit to publish a series of notes explaining the references. This allusiveness keeps the barbarian at bay. It makes the poet feel like the German professor whom William James heard say at the opening of a lecture: “It is pleasant, gentlemen, to think that in a minute or two we shall be completely separated from the Philistine by a thick veil of unintelligibility.”

Both poetry and prose writers of the more advanced school make free use of improper words and unpleasant metaphors. They are like ribald boys who scribble bad words on walls, with the difference that while the boys do it through sheer mischievousness, the modernists act from a high moral (or medical) motive. They plead that they shock the public for the public's good. The indecencies are alleged to be part of the general scheme of purification. Hidden things are lugged into the sunlight, ventilated, and disinfected, and nothing is any longer common or unclean. The hiding of these things is due to taboos; and the taboos of civilised society are no more reasonable than the taboos of savage races. It is, therefore, the mark of an emancipated mind to despise all taboos, and to miss no opportunity of flouting Mrs. Grundy.

<sup>1</sup> For other instances, see p. 187; but for a fuller discussion of the question see *Literary Quotation and Allusion*, by E. E. Kelllett—a charming little book.

A deep note of melancholy runs through the whole of modernist literature. The poets of the extreme school are pessimistic to a man. They regard the universe itself as hostile. And since man is born to sorrow as the sparks to fly upwards, he were wise to adjust himself as best he could to this sorrowful world. He must above all things avoid living in a fool's paradise. Dr. Richards believes that Hardy's greatness lies in the fact that "he is the poet who has most steadily refused to be comforted." If this is a merit, it is a merit which many an unworthy person succeeds in achieving.

The gloomiest of Victorians were merely agnostic. William Watson expresses the attitude in this stanza from *World-Strangeness*:

On from room to room I stray,  
Yet my Host can ne'er espy,  
And I know not to this day  
Whether guest or captive I.

But the modernist poet knows—he knows that he is a captive. And, like a sulky child, he refuses to be comforted.

On the contrary, he blasphemes. Colin Ellis, a young satirist of the old school, is at least witty when he puts the faith of the physicist in these words:

Science, exploring Nature's schemes,  
Its former sentence now revokes:  
God is not one of Man's bad dreams  
But Man is one of God's bad jokes.

But what are we to think of this sentence with which Mr. Michael Roberts ends his book *Critique of Poetry*?

"There is one joke which is legitimate and ultimate, and it is God." On that sentence I have two remarks to make: the first is that it is in bad taste, and the second is that it is silly.

Why do I devote so much space to these new poets? Because they claim to be the true pioneers; they claim that their work represents the growing point, and the only growing point, of modern literature. All the rest is imitative and dead. Meanwhile the great mass of English poetry and prose moves on undisturbed by these rebel voices. And the great mass of English people remains true to a more humane tradition. It still continues to love Charles Lamb and Charles Dickens, and to show no sort of interest in the tortuosities of John Donne, or the eccentricities of Ezra Pound.

Now listen to what Mr. F. L. Lucas, one of the most distinguished of English scholars, has to say:

Thus a panegyric by a modern critic on Mr. Ezra Pound, after celebrating the poet's subtlety in the use of inverted commas, proceeds: "His pose, though so varied, and for all his audacities, is sure; how sure, nothing can show better than the pun in the last stanza of the third poem:

O bright Apollo,  
 τίς ἀνδρα, τίς ἥρωα, τίνα θεόν  
 What god, man, or hero  
 Shall I place a tin wreath upon!

"In what poet, after the seventeenth century," continues the critic, "can we find anything like this contributing to a completely serious effect (the poem is not only tragically serious but solemn)!" "τίς ἀνδρα"—"tin wreath"—(the sort of very bad joke made by very small boys beginning Greek)—"sureness of

poise"—"not only tragically serious but solemn!" Solemn?  
—Yes. A belfry full of owls could not equal it. But, as wit,  
surely Slender himself would have found it a little thin?<sup>1</sup>

This seems to me to be quite fair and legitimate comment. I do not suppose that adverse criticism, even if undeserved, ever did permanent harm to anybody or anything. That Keats was killed by the *Quarterly Review* is now an exploded legend; that his poetry was injured by it is demonstrably untrue. The very hand that wrote the crushing review on Keats in 1818 wrote in 1833 another review equally crushing. This time the victim was a young man called Alfred Tennyson who was trying to make himself conspicuous by publishing a book of poems. This time the reviewer's vein was ironical, as witness:

The next piece is a kind of testamentary paper, addressed "To —," a friend, we presume, containing his wishes as to what his friend should do for him when he (the poet) shall be dead. . . .

"Then let wise Nature work her will,  
And on my clay her darnels grow.  
Come only when the days are still,  
And at my headstone whisper low,  
And tell me . . ."

Now, what would an ordinary bard wish to be told under such circumstances?—why, perhaps, how his sweetheart was, or his child, or his family, or how the Reform Bill worked; or whether the last edition of the poems had been sold—*pape*! our genuine poet's first wish is

"And tell me—if the woodbines blow!"

<sup>1</sup> *The Criticism of Poetry*, by F. L. Lucas, pp. 7-8.

Having heard enough about the new poetry the reader will perhaps like to hear a little about the new prose; but there is only one man who writes it—James Joyce. True there is Gertrude Stein, but it is difficult to take her seriously. And there is Virginia Woolf, who has experimented in novel ways of writing novels; but her prose is ordinary prose. Not so James Joyce's, except in his earlier work. In parts of his monumental book *Ulysses*, he employs language in a new way, trying to make it do what it has never done before. And he has elaborated and perfected his method in his later work, which he issues in brief parts and calls *Work in Progress*. It is still in progress. Here is an extract taken at random from the episode called *Haveth Childers Everywhere*:

Hattentats have mindered. Blaublaze devilbobs have gone from the mode and hairtrigger nicks are quite out of time now. Thuggeries are reere as glovars' metins, lepers lack, ignerants show beneath suspicion like the bitterhalves of esculapuloids.<sup>1</sup>

There is no single word here that does not suggest something, does not seem to have some sort of meaning behind it, however oblique or ambiguous. *Hattentats* suggests *Hottentots*, *blaublaze*, *blue blaze*; *devilbobs*, *Robert the devil and his like*, *hairtrigger nicks*, *tricks with pistols*; *thuggeries*, *murders carried out professionally*; *ignerants*, *ignorance*; *esculapuloids*, *esculent bivalves*. The phrases too are suggestive. *Reere as glovars' metins* may mean *rare as plovers' eggs*, or *dear as lovers' meetings*, or perhaps *lovers' greetings*. At any rate, after reading it a few times we seem to get a vague idea that dare-devil murders are becoming a little rare. There is, I have no doubt,

<sup>1</sup> *Haveth Childers Everywhere*, by James Joyce, p. 17.

very much more in it than that. Indeed, we are assured that passages in *Work in Progress* when read aloud in the proper way reveal lower and lower depths of meaning. It is deep calling unto deep. And if one gets but little out of it, it is deep calling unto shallow. So one has to be careful in one's admissions. Mr. Herbert Read finds the work provocative of laughter—appreciative laughter, of course. So does Mr. Charles Duff, who says, "*Work in Progress* is entirely genial in conception: even those parts which we do not understand may evoke laughter."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Louis Golding is more cautious in his estimate. "To read even a page of the work as it stands, to extract from it its non-sensuous virtues, requires the closest intellectual application, and even then the reader is quite sure he has missed a good deal. The work is not yet finished. And both criticism and any attempt at exposition must hold themselves in abeyance till it is."<sup>2</sup> So nobody seems to know at present whether *Work in Progress* is a colossal Irish joke, or a serious attempt to invent a new form of literature which is neither poetry nor prose.

It is certainly not prose, for prose that is not clear is not prose at all. And it makes no pretensions to poetry. In terms of the new tongue, therefore, I may sum up by saying that the langscridge of Shirk in Progress is a wuz-fuz of proetry and pose.

<sup>1</sup> *James Joyce and the Plain Dealer*, p. 70.

<sup>2</sup> *James Joyce*, by Louis Golding, p. 143.

## APPENDIX

### NOEGENESIS

(An account of Professor Spearman's theory of Intelligence, which was written for *The Journal of General Psychology* for October 1929, and is reprinted here through the courtesy of the Editor.)

NOEGENESIS is a word invented by Professor Spearman; and its invention was a necessity. For a new psychological theory had been brought into the world, and the new theory needed a new name: none of the old names would fit. The purpose of this article is to explain what the new theory is, and to show what it means for the future of psychology, and of the allied sciences of logic and education.

Before Dr. Spearman published his great book <sup>1</sup> in 1923 the psychological doctrine of knowledge (the theory of how each individual mind thinks and knows) was in a discreditable state. The old theories had been abandoned and no new theories had arrived to take their place. Nobody any longer believed that the association of ideas really explained anything, nobody any longer believed that the doctrine of faculties was anything more than a popular attempt to classify mental processes, and a very clumsy attempt at that—bad as classification, and worse still as a principle of explanation. At the same time everybody used the old terms; everybody talked about perception, memory, imagination, and so forth, as though they meant distinct and separate processes, with no common elements and no common laws. The popular terms were used because no better terms were available.

<sup>1</sup> *The Nature of Intelligence and the Principles of Cognition* (Macmillan).

Moreover, psychological interest had been diverted into other channels. The theories of Freud, Jung, and Adler seemed to offer a fruitful field of labour to those who were in a hurry to apply psychology to everyday life and saw in psycho-analysis an opportunity to enhance the health and happiness of mankind. Hence the unconscious was studied rather than the conscious, the emotional and volitional side of mind rather than the cognitive side. And applied psychology flourished at the expense of pure psychology. But pure psychology cannot be ignored without serious detriment to the practical issues, nor can the theory of thinking be set aside until problems of feeling and willing have been solved. In fact, two interesting excursions were made into the neglected realm—one from America and the other from Germany. In America the result was Behaviourism, in Germany the Gestalt Psychology. The American adventure need not detain us long. In the hands of the behaviourists, psychology committed suicide and nothing was left to study but the physical organism. Psychology abdicated in favour of physiology. The Gestalt theory, however, is quite another matter. Here we have a genuine attempt to place the psychology of thought on a new basis. The old categories have been left behind and a search has been made for new laws and new principles of explanation. And there is little doubt that Wertheimer, Kohler, Koffka, and others of the school have pushed psychological inquiry along the right road. They have, generally speaking, moved in the right direction, but they have not gone far enough. Like the followers of the older school they have failed to find ultimate laws, failed to reach ultimate elements.

Meanwhile Dr. Spearman, Professor of the Philosophy of Mind at the University of London, has been attacking the problem in his own way. The main purpose of his investigations was to find out how the human intellect is con-

stituted; and for the last quarter of a century he has organised and directed a large number of researches and experiments all serving the same central purpose, all bearing on the psychology of knowledge. The subject is not to be confused with the *theory* of knowledge. It has at present nothing to do with an inquiry into the validity of human knowledge in general. It limits itself to the purely psychological aspect of the question, and leaves the metaphysical aspect severely alone.<sup>1</sup> It is specially concerned in answering the question: How did knowledge come into existence in the individual mind? How did you and I come to know what we know? There are many other questions involved as well, but this is the central question. And if one word could give Professor Spearman's answer, that word would be Noegenesis (Gr. νοέω = I think, γένεσις = an origin). Noegenesis is the process by which new knowledge enters the human mind. Old knowledge may reappear through reproduction, but new knowledge can only come by way of noegenesis. It is in his masterly analysis of this process that Dr Spearman's special contribution to the theory of cognition lies.

He has attacked the problem from a new angle. Instead of taking the current categories of mind for granted—instead of assuming that intelligence, memory, imagination, reason, and such like are valid as scientific classifications of mental phenomena—he has challenged the whole traditional system. He has tried to examine the mind *de novo* and to find out by a new method its natural lines of cleavage. He starts from the fact end, not the name end. Instead of testing and measuring a man's memory, perception, imagination, or what not, he tries to find what factors

<sup>1</sup> It does not follow that the theory of noegenesis has no bearing on Epistemology. Indeed, its philosophical implications are numerous and profound. To reveal them, however, is a task of the future.

in the mind have real functional unity; and his tests and measurements and statistical analyses are but means by which he achieves this end. In other words his quest has been for elements and for simple fundamental laws. When he has found them he discovers that they cannot fit in with the current terminology. The old bottles will not hold the new wine.

The trouble with current psychology is (and this is just as true of the newer Gestalt psychology as of the older faculty psychology) that the analysis is incomplete. It is quite true that we have faculties—that we observe, remember, reason, and so forth; but these processes are neither simple nor independent. They are highly complex, and the elements found in any of them are to be found in others as well. It is quite true, as our Gestalt friends tell us, that what we really cognise is not a mass of separate elements, but rather a plan or pattern which binds those elements together into one psychical whole. But the patterns which the mind is capable of weaving are innumerable, and we can make no real progress till we discover the simple laws on which they are constructed. Neither the theory of faculties nor the theory of shapes had arrived at the elemental units. They had perhaps reached the molecules, but not the atoms; or to be quite modern, the atoms but not the electrons. The honour of finding the electrons belongs to Professor Spearman. His electrons are "characters" and "relations."

What precisely is Spearman's doctrine of Noegenesis? The simplest way to understand it is to study in turn his three simple noegenetic laws or principles.<sup>1</sup> The first is called the Apprehension of Experience, the second the Education of Relations, and the third the Education of

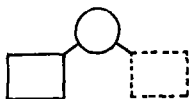
<sup>1</sup> These laws are fully expounded in Spearman's two books: (1) *The Nature of Intelligence*, (2) *The Abilities of Man*.

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mind any idea together with a relation, he has more or less power to bring up into mind the correlative idea. For example, let anyone hear a musical note and try to imagine the note a fifth higher. If he understands the relation of 'fifth' and, moreover, possesses an ear for music, he will more or less accurately accomplish the task."<sup>1</sup> With the same symbolism as before the educing of correlates is herewith illustrated.



As in the former diagram the continuous line represents what is originally given, and the dotted line what is educed. It is in the discovery of this last principle, and in the realisation of its significance and import, that Spearman has most markedly shown his originality. The question of relations in general was by no means ignored by the earlier psychologists. Though they did not see the full meaning of this special kind of cognitive process they did not leave it wholly out of account. The question of correlates, however, which is equally important and equally pervasive of the mental life of man, seems almost entirely to have escaped their notice. And, indeed, the whole theory of relationship, even by those who dealt with it most adequately, was regarded as quite subsidiary to certain other principles of mental process. It is true that the Gestalt school of psychologists, to which in a sense Spearman himself belongs, has recently raised form or pattern to its proper level of importance, but it has neglected to analyse form into the simple relations of which it is composed. It has been left for Spearman to do this, and to formulate in the simplest way the laws that

<sup>1</sup> *The Abilities of Man*, p. 166.

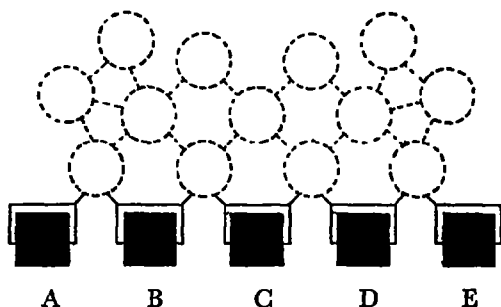
underlie the development of knowledge in the mind of man.

These three noegenetic laws may fitly be compared to Newton's three laws of motion. Just as Newton's laws of motion apply to the whole field of mechanics, so do Spearman's laws of noegenesis apply to the whole field of cognition, except in so far as cognition is merely reproductive. If we leave memory out of account and solely consider the acquisition of entirely new knowledge, the three processes corresponding to the three laws make up all the cognition of which the human mind is capable. And just as at first sight Newton's laws seem very simple and obvious, but their bearing upon the behaviour of physical objects is only seen after close and detailed study, so do Spearman's principles readily gain one's assent on first acquaintance, but need to be specially studied in relation to the numerous problems of pure and applied psychology if we are to see how they illuminate the dark places, and make clear what was before vague and perplexing.

It must not be thought that the material on which the two educative processes work is as simple as the above exposition would lead us to believe, for the product of one education may become a fundament of another. If *A, B, C, D, E* in the next diagram are the fundaments from which we start (we must start somewhere) the relations between them may become the basis of new educations. The figure indicates but a few of the possible relationships, and merely suggests their possible complexity. We may, indeed, pile up an indefinite number of relations and correlates and form a huge fabric of constructive thought which terminates in notions widely removed from the elementary notions from which we started. Nor must it be thought that the construction of this fabric applies to reasoning only. It operates over the whole field of cognition, from the following of a cinema film to the understanding of a picture by

Velasquez, a symphony by Beethoven, or a play by Shakespeare.

Leaving the realm of pure psychology let us consider the implication of Spearman's theories for Logic and Educa-



tion. Logic is supposed to analyse the process of reasoning and to supply norms by which its validity may be established. But what is "reasoning"? Can animals reason? The mere fact that we still argue over this question indicates the general haziness of our opinions on the matter. It isn't that we don't know what animals can do, but that we don't know whether to call it reasoning. The one thing upon which all are agreed is that in reasoning we somehow or other derive a new idea from old ideas—and this without further recourse to experience. Whether consciously or unconsciously, whether spontaneously or by deliberate effort, we "draw out" from something which is given something which is not explicitly but only implicitly given. The traditional term for this process is "inference" or "deduction." Spearman has employed the more appropriate term "eduction" and has defined it more closely. Eduction is shown to be the primary process that underlies all forms of reasoning. It is the only process that is common

to all. It was at one time believed that the Aristotelian syllogism was the basic type to which all true reasoning conformed. It was later realised that deductive logic was only part of the process by which we arrived at truth. The longer process was called induction or the method of scientific inquiry—a process that begins earlier than deduction and includes it. It begins, not with the statement that all  $X$  is  $Y$  but with the evidence on which that statement is based. It begins, in fact, with particulars and not with generalities. The pertinent fact, however, is that neither inductive logic nor deductive logic could be made to cover the whole field. There were innumerable instances which manifestly come under the head of reasoning, and yet could neither be pressed into the syllogistic mould, nor explained by the newer principles of induction. Even pure deductive reasoning, such as is common in mathematics, often remained outside the pale of the recognised laws. When a type of reasoning is so common as to be readily identified, it receives a label, such as the *a fortiori* argument, for instance. The *a fortiori* argument, however, is but one type among a multitude of nameless types which have resisted all attempts at classification. And the skeleton key to the whole multitude has been supplied by Spearman. He has shown us that every form of ratiocination can be resolved into simple processes which are of two kinds and two kinds only—the eduction of relations and the eduction of correlates. If we examine one of Euclid's propositions in the light of the new theory, we shall find that it consists of a progressive series of educations, each education, since the relation involved is nearly always a relation of pure equality, being extremely simple in itself, but the whole structure appearing complex on account of its progressive and cumulative nature. The same is true of all mathematical reasoning. In their final analysis all arithmetical and algebraic processes, the highest as well as the lowest, prove

to be compounded of the two primary processes of eduction—the eduction of relations, and the eduction of correlates.

Illuminating as Spearman's theories are in the realm of logic it is in the realm of education that they throw the most abundant light. There is indeed no educational problem of modern times which has not been clarified, if not solved, by the methods and principles formulated by Spearman. Let us, for instance, consider the question of mental tests. The testing of intelligence has been pursued with increasing assiduity for the last twenty years. The mere volume of work has assumed colossal dimensions. Yet the bulk of it has been purely empirical. The testers have been fumbling after something vague, undefined, indeterminate. The results have differed in different hands, and nobody has been able to explain the difference. The reason for all this confusion is not far to seek: there has been no clear hypothesis guiding the experiments, no fixed criteria by which the results may be evaluated and interpreted. Fortunately these strictures do not apply to all the investigations; they do not apply to those conducted under Spearman's guidance. His well-known theory of general and specific factors in our mental make-up (a theory which he first put forward a quarter of a century ago, and which his more recent researches in noogenesis serve to establish) is the only constructive theory of intelligence that has ever been put forward. All other theories, when they are not too nebulous to be of any use, are merely negative and destructive. Under the new analysis of cognition, not only does the general aim of intelligence testing acquire some sort of scientific precision, but each particular test takes on a new meaning. There is now some chance of knowing what it is that each test tests. And it is becoming increasingly clear that the connection between noogenesis and intelligence is very close indeed.

Of all the educational problems of modern times, or,

indeed, of all time, the most vital is that of formal training. How far is mental power gained by the exercise of one particular mental function available for use in other functions? To what extent is the result of training transferable? In spite of the fact that an army of researchers have for many years been attacking the problem both in Europe and America, no final solution has yet been reached. The only conclusion agreed to by all is that the amount of transfer is not so great as we thought it was; and the only explanation of transfer that has been offered is that it is due to the presence of common factors, though nobody can say what the common factors are. The consequence is that of late years the enthusiasm of the researchers has languished almost to the point of extinction. Once more do we find scientific progress checked by the lack of a complete analysis of mental processes. Spearman's new analysis gives to the research a new impetus and a new orientation. The problem of formal training can now be attacked from a different angle, and this time with a reasonable chance of reaching a successful issue.

Let us now take a problem which is more immediately practical. How much memorising should be done at school? What is its relation to intelligence or reason? If for the loose and ambiguous words "intelligence" and "reason" we substitute the word education, which has now been given a definite scientific meaning, it is easier to answer the question. We require our pupils to make progress, and Spearman has demonstrated that the only steps by which the mind can march into new realms of thought are the two educative processes. Direct experience and memory provide the solid starting point, but the forward thrust, the life and movement of the human spirit, comes from education. As the verb is the soul of the sentence, so is education the soul of thinking; and as the verb cannot live without the noun, so does education owe its very existence to the tributary

service of sense and memory. It is quite impossible to build up in the pupil's mind such a structure of knowledge as is illustrated in the last diagram unless the relations already educed are automatically recalled so as to form the fundamentals of new relations. All this has an obvious and important bearing on the rote work of our schools. It indicates when the essential aim should be to foster understanding, and when it should be to fix a habit.

The applications of the noegenetic theory are not confined to the academic world: they extend over the whole of human life. In all purposive behaviour, in all plotting and planning, in all devising of means to ends, the warp and woof are the two processes of education. If the matter be well scrutinised it will be found that the final step in the solution of a practical problem is always the education of a correlate.

I have but touched the fringe of a wide topic. I have traced a few only of the many ramifications of the theory of noegenesis; but I have said enough to show that it possesses the one quality that more than any other gives a theory the hall-mark of scientific validity; that is, it is *fruitful*. Not only does it, in conjunction with Spearman's other cognitive principles, which deal with the quantitative side,<sup>1</sup> bring simplicity and order into a chaotic region of pure psychology, but it leads to new discoveries in various realms of applied psychology. It solves old problems and gives rise to fresh ones. It thus stimulates research and advances our knowledge of the way in which the mind exercises those functions which are most distinctively human.

A word about Spearman's books. The two already published will be followed by a third, which will give a critical

<sup>1</sup> The three noegenetic laws are qualitative only: they need to be supplemented by quantitative laws. For the former merely indicate a "tendency," whereas the latter indicate when and where the tendency is realised.

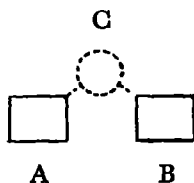
review of current psychological theories. They are books to be read and re-read. Though they are written in a style that is vigorous and lucid, the language is so loaded with thought that the reading is by no means easy. It demands mental effort, but it is effort for which the reader will be abundantly repaid.

**Correlates** The first runs thus: *Any lived experience tends to evoke immediately a knowing of its characters and experienter*, or, as Spearman expresses it elsewhere, *of its direct attributes and experienter*. By a "character" is meant any attribute of the outer or inner world that can become an object of thought. Spearman himself puts the law very clearly and simply in the following words. "A person has more or less power to observe what goes on in his own mind. He not only feels but knows what he feels; he not only strives, but knows that he strives; he not only knows, but knows that he knows." Expressed in this way it seems so obvious as to be axiomatic. And yet hidden beneath the surface are many points of ancient controversy. There lies the distinction between experience and awareness, the question whether consciousness does or does not necessarily involve self-consciousness; and the more pressing question of to-day—the relation between the unconscious and the conscious. Experience means to Spearman a much wider thing than knowledge; it merely *tends* to become knowledge, and it actually *does* become knowledge when it is intense enough to rise above the threshold of consciousness. Knowledge has degrees of clearness. The clearness may sink to zero, and the experience remain though the knowledge has vanished. Room is thus left in the noegenetic theory for those realms which have been variously called the sub-conscious, the unconscious, and the foreconscious.

The second principle more manifestly breaks new ground. It is formulated thus: *The presenting of any two or more characters tends to evolve immediately a knowing of relation between them*. This law "states that when a person has in mind any two or more ideas (using the word to embrace any items of mental content, whether perceived or thought of) he has more or less power to bring to mind any relations that essentially hold between them" "It is instanced whenever a person becomes aware, say, that beer tastes some-

thing like weak quinine, that the number seven is larger than five, or that the proposition 'All A is B' proves the proposition 'Some A is B.' For the attributes involved here—resemblances, comparative size, and logical evidence—are undeniably of the kind called relations."<sup>1</sup>

Spearman uses the accompanying diagram to illustrate this principle:



*A* and *B* represent the characters that are presented to the mind, and *C* represents the relation that tends to become known between them. *A* and *B* are called the "fundaments"—the basic items between which the relation holds. If the relation between the fundamentals is grasped by the mind, "eduction" has taken place. Using the word "see" in its figurative as well as in its literal sense we may say that there are three possibilities. A person may see *A* and *B* without seeing any relation between them, that is without seeing *C*, or he may see *A* and *B* first, and then after a while see *C*, or he may see *A*, *B*, and *C* all at the same time, or so nearly at the same time that it is impossible to divide the processes into two phases. Thus eduction *tends* to take place. It may not take place at all, it may take place after a pause, or it may take place immediately.

We now come to the third and last principle—the Eduction of Correlates: *The presenting of any character together with a relation tends to evoke immediately a knowing of the correlative character.* In other words "when a person has in

<sup>1</sup> *The Abilities of Man*, p. 165.

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